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THE RED GASH OUTLAWS

RANGER LEE

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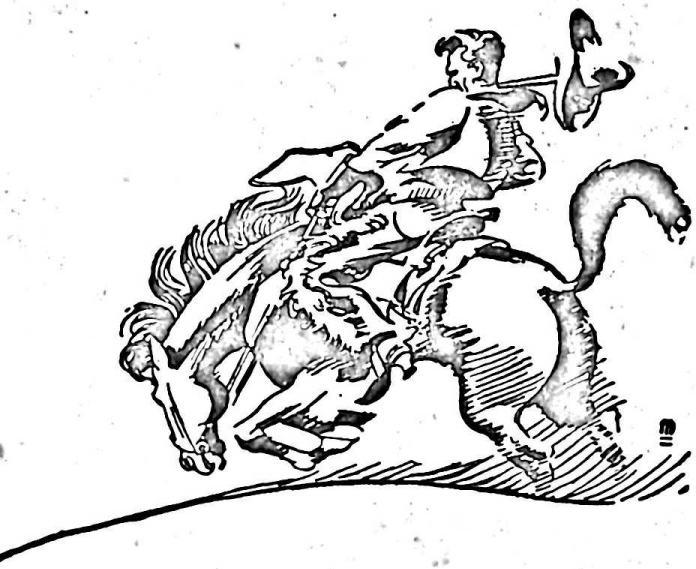

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CHAPTER I

RED GASH VALLEY was an impregnable hangout. At least that was what the men who inhabited it thought, and for good reason. They had never been run out. They had prospered in their lawless ways.

It was not a red gash, this break in the southerly side of the rugged San Martin Mountains, but a beautiful, cliff-bounded valley some three miles long and a mile wide at its widest place. Nobody knew how it had received its name. When the white settlers had come they had found it inhabited by warlike Indians. When the redskins had been driven out their places had been taken by white men, craftier if not as bloodthirsty.

To make the hidden valley more beautiful, a creek meandered through it from the red canyon at the north to the rocky mazes of another red canyon at the south, from which it finally emerged to water the rich cattle region of Harlan Valley.

Where once there had been hundreds of Apaches in Red Gash, hunting and making war, there were now but eight inhabitants. These men made war on the cattlemen of Harlan Valley and drove their stolen cattle through the northerly pass to where there were buyers who paid low prices and asked no questions.

The eight did not confine their depredations to rustling. They occasionally robbed stages and, less frequently, banks. Because of them more than one man had started across the San Martins and never finished his journey. Not a one of them but would

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waylay a wandering cowboy or prospector in the hope of getting ten dollars for his trouble.

Their home was in the middle of the valley, with the cottonwoods along the creek for background and out of rifleshot from the tall cliffs to east and west.

On this sunny forenoon in late spring seven white men lolled in front of the sprawling log house which had been built by a gang this one had driven from the valley by force and cunning a few years before.

Jack Littrell, the leader of the outfit, lithe and tall and in his thirties, was a clean-shaven man with cold, steely eyes. He watched as his men talked and worked. Two, Kirkup and Nashwilder, were repairing saddles. Andrus and Ritter cleaned their guns. The burly, black-bearded Antrim puffed at his pipe and stared at the cliffs with deep-set dark eyes.

"When we goin' to start the next rustle, boss?" drawled the lean Draper, who was known as "Laredo." "The cows sure ought to be fine and fat by now."

"And our purses are plenty lean," chuckled Antrim, who liked to play poker but seldom won.

"It's gettin' about time," said Littrell. "We ought to make a drive inside a week or so."

The squat, blunt-faced Kirkup came and sat on his heels so he might look straight at the leader.

"Bar H and Circle N cattle?" asked Nashwilder, who was big, bearded, blond.

"What else?" Littrell shrugged a shoulder.

"I was thinkin'," put in Kirkup, "we orter rob a bank or somethin' as would turn out a pile of dinero, and pronto."

"Where?"

"Say in Maguey," said Kirkup. "There's only one bank there, and it ought to have money."

"And Maguey's got a sheriff," spoke up Ritter.

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All the others except Littrell laughed, some raucously.

"Yeah, a sheriff," drawled the leader, "but if he was much of a sheriff he'd give us plenty trouble before now."

"Aw, he's a damned fine sheriff," Nashwilder chuckled.

Again the men laughed; even Littrell smiled a little.

"I reckon," he drawled, "we ain't got much to fear in Sheriff M'Cracken."

"Because he's too big and fat," sneered the squatting outlaw.

"And scared of gettin' some hot lead in his guts," laughed Ritter. "Last time I was in Maguey, though, I heard the cattlemen was crowdin' him to make war on us."

"He won't!" swore Nashwilder.

Littrell nodded, but remained silent.

"Speakin' of Bar H cattle," drawled Ritter, "what's wrong with stealin' that gal of Harlan's. She'd be worth a lot of dinero. Bet my life her old man'd dig up his pile to get her back once we had her here."

Littrell swung cold eyes on the speaker. Then his eyes twinkled slightly, as if behind them had come a worth-while thought from the other man's suggestion.

"That'd be risky as hell," put in Draper, who had left Texas half a jump ahead of the law.

"Huh! What ain't risky?" demanded Kirkup. "Ain't stealin' cattle risky?"

"It ain't been," disputed Andrus as he wiped his long, grisly moustache. "There ain't none of us been kilt yet."

They all knew the risks they ran, but the life suited their wild, reckless natures. Not one of them but was wanted somewhere. They knew, however, that Red

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Gash Valley was a good hangout. To south was the rich range of Harlan Valley, which had been settled by Tom Harlan. In the other direction, across the pass, was the village of Vernon, which was in another county and a county whose officers took little trouble to inquire what went on south of the pass. Ford, who was always ready to buy stolen cattle, lived in Vernon.

"How many cows you hope to get next time, Jack?" Kirkup asked.

"Couple of hundred, maybe. Yeah, we ought to be able to rustle that many."

In Vernon they would probably get twenty dollars a head for the cattle. All except the leader began to figure what the share would be. Ritter came to where he could stand before the quiet, hard-bitten Littrell.

"Now looky here, Jack, I wasn't jokin' about the idea of stealin' the Harlan girl. She'd be worth more'n a thousand cows, once we got her here. Once she was in Red Gash Valley, all the ranchers and all the damned officers wouldn't cause us much trouble, for fear we'd kill the girl, or hurt her."

Andrus and Nashwilder said they had never done any kidnapping. The idea did not appeal to them.

"Durned if I know," muttered Antrim as he refilled his pipe.

"It's this way," resumed Ritter when Littrell did not speak, "we stole a thousand cattle from Harlan Valley. What's the matter with stealin' one girl as is worth a thousand cattle? It'd save a hell of a lot of hard work."

"Yeah," Nashwilder chuckled, "and we wouldn't have to drive her across the pass and sell her, would we?"

"We sure wouldn't!" Ritter swore with enthusiasm. "Get her here, and old Harlan would be plenty willin' to dig up real dinero to get her back."

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"And without makin' a fight," added Draper. "It ain't such a bad idee, Rit. Sometimes I get durned tired of drivin' cattle."

"Bad idea?" chuckled Ritter. "Say, it's the best one this outfit's had in months!"

"Except my idea of robbin' the Maguey bank," disputed Kirkup. "There's ready money in a bank. You have to cash in on a gal if you can manage to steal her."

"Well, it's this way," drawled Antrim, "if we got a purty gal here likely Jack'd want her for his own property, and the rest of us'd be left to hold the sack." The black-whiskered outlaw looked up at the leader to see how his remark had been received. Littrell's clean, sun-browned face remained inscrutable.

"I ain't hankerin' to be loved by any woman I have to take by force," he said. "If we steal this Harlan girl it'll be for the dinero she'll fetch, and we'll split the usual way."

"Then we'll do it, Jack?" Ritter demanded enthusiastically. "It'll beat hell out of stealin' cattle!"

Kirkup joined in, as eager now to kidnap the girl as he had been to rob a bank.

"What's wrong with you, Kirk?" laughed Ritter. "I thought you was all for stagin' a bank hold-up."

Kirkup retorted that they could rob the bank after they had received a fat ransom for Nancy Harlan.

"Huh!" Antrim growled. "You two squirts talk like doin' such things was as easy as wishin' to do 'em. Stealin' gals ain't so easy as it sounds. Once I knowed a man as tried it. He got hung for his trouble."

"Must have been a damned fool!" sneered Ritter.

"Or somethin' slipped," Kirkup added.

"The rope round his neck didn't slip," chuckled the brutal Antrim. "I seen him hangin' there to the

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limb of that cottonwood. It was 'way down on the Brazos."

As he listened to the argument, Littrell slid his long body down the worm-eaten logs until he sat upon his heels. He seemed to be watching the westerly cliffs, as if expecting something to appear on their rim at any moment. In reality he was weighing what Ritter had suggested. Tom Harlan was rated rich.

"Let's steal the damned gal, Jack!" Ritter insisted.

"You bet!" added Kirkup.

It seemed a full minute before Littrell shifted his gaze from the cliffs.

"We'll take care of the cattle first," he decreed. "Then we'll consider the girl. That's final."

"Then this here gal-stealin' sounds good to you, Jack?"

An end of Littrell's mouth bent up in what might have been a half-smile of agreement.

"It's a reckless plan," he said as his reckless nature was stirred anew, "but it don't sound so bad at that. Fact is, I had thought of it before. But as I said, we'll make the gather of Bar H and Circle N cattle, and then think about the gal. You see, if we make a big haul of cattle there may be trouble about them. I seen certain symptoms of late."

"Symptoms of what?" Kirkup demanded.

"That Harlan and Nesbit are gettin' just a little tired of us rustlin' their cattle," drawled Littrell as he rose and flexed his long, sinewy arms. "It ain't to be expected they'll continue to make as little trouble as they have in the past."

Nashwilder flung down the saddle he had been patching, and scrambled to his feet. He gestured towards the sides of the rock-rimmed hangout.

"You see them cliffs yonder. You see that pass down there? And up there? I'd like to know how

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fifty hard-shootin' riders are goin' to get in here and cause us any hell of a lot of trouble!"

They all knew their hangout was comparatively safe, and to make it more so, a sentry was usually posted among the broken crags at the lower end of the valley, the point from which the ranchers would attack if they decided to attack at last. The sentry there now was Chico, a Mexican and the eighth member of the gang, a lesser member who got little for his work. Now hidden on a high shelf of rock, Chico was in a position to see riders in ample time to warn the outlaws at the log house in the middle of the valley, while they themselves had the cliffs at east and west in plain view.

"But look here, Jack," Ritter persisted, "let's steal the gal first, then make a big gather of cattle."

Some of the others joined in urging this course on the leader. Even Antrim seemed to have become enamoured of the plan for kidnapping the girl.

"No," Littrell drawled with finality. "We gather the cattle first. Then we'll think about the girl-stealin' business."

As he spoke he stiffened. The others saw the cold fixity of his look, and followed it. Silhouetted upon the westerly rim was a lone rider.

"Well, by hell!" Antrim swore.

"I'm a son of a gun!" drawled Laredo. "Wonder who he is?"

"Whoever he is, he ain't got no business bein' here!" snarled Ritter. "The damned maverick, he looks like he'd been watchin' us for hours!"

"For just a few minutes," corrected Littrell. "I saw him nosin' his way out of the timber to north an hour ago. Say, Rit, fetch me the glasses from inside. I yearn to see just what that jasper looks like."

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CHAPTER II

THE arroyo-scarred plains at the northerly side of the San Martin Mountains undulated under the midday heat, and the short main street of Vernon lay hot and drab. Aside from a few Mexican children, only two of the inhabitants of the village were out of doors.

One of these was Elijah Ford, the buyer of stolen cattle. The other was a very old man who sat in the shade of the adobe wall of his house near the northerly end of the dusty, listless street. He, like Ford, who sat under the wooden awning before his small office, watched the lone rider approaching from northward.

Elijah Ford was a small man and wizened, yet with keen pale eyes. They were narrowed and speculative now, for he did not like to see strangers ride into Vernon. Still, it was not so bad if a stranger came from the north. For years he had lived in dread that certain men would ride across the San Martins from the south and make his business unprofitable, or perhaps put an end to it.

Lije Ford had connections farther north to whom he disposed of the cattle he bought. Now as he watched the rider he found some comfort in the hope that here was a man coming for more cattle. Even at the distance of half a mile he knew that the rider did not belong to the Littrell gang of Red Gash Valley.

"Likely some feller from the railroad," he muttered to himself as he chewed on the end of a frayed and cheap cigar.

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It was with displeasure that he saw the rider rein towards the adobe house near the end of the street. Of all the inhabitants of Vernon, Ford like old Joe Holliday the least, in fact he hated him.

"Now I wonder what he wants to see that old desert beetle for! Likely to ask directions somewhere."

White-whiskered Joe Holliday had been cowboy, rancher, ranger, sheriff, and during forty years he had accumulated considerable money along with the scars of a few bullets. Why he chose to live in the desolate village no one but he knew. He hated Lije Ford as he was hated by Ford, and perhaps from this hatred he got his greatest pleasure.

Old Joe's squinted blue eyes took on a speculative interest as he watched the approach of the horseman. He saw a rather tall young man on a good roan that looked as if it had been ridden far. He noted the man's overalls and blue cotton shirt, and particularly the way he wore his six-shooter and cartridge-belt.

The stranger drew his horse to a stop. He regarded the old man, who had his chair tilted against the dry-mud wall.

"Howdy, sir."

"Wal, howdy," returned Holliday.

The men surveyed each other. The stranger folded his brown hands on the tall saddle-horn. Old Joe was trying to decide whether this were a new recruit for the Red Gash gang.

"Ye another durned cattle thief?" he demanded. "If ye air——"

The young stranger's sun-browned face paled a little, but he grinned.

"Well now," he drawled, "I don't recollect stealin' any cattle. You don't seem to like rustlers, eh?"

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"Hate 'em like pizen!" Old Joe snapped so savagely that his gums bumped together. "If I was as young as I was when I was sheriff of Gonzales County, there wouldn't be any cattle stealin' round these parts. Sometimes I got a gol-durned notion to buckle on my gun and put a stop to it as it is!"

After dismounting, the stranger drew the reins over the head of his horse and sat down on the hard ground. He laid his hat beside him, revealing curly blond hair. He rolled a cigarette as he was closely appraised by the old eyes.

"May I ask your name, sir?"

"Kin if ye want to! Don't know as I was ever ashamed of it! She's Joe Holliday. Whar ye from, boy?"

Instead of answering, the stranger looked intently at the old face.

"Joe Holliday, eh?"

"Yep, and I ain't a durned bit ashamed to admit it! If ye're a cattle rustler I don't want to talk to ye! Don't want ye foulin' up my yard by settin' on it!"

"And if I'm not a rustler——"

"I'll be durned glad to talk to ye. Whar ye from?"

The stranger smiled.

"Did you ever live at Agua Prieta on the Nueces, Mr. Holliday?"

"Durned right I did! What you savvy about that kentry, boy?"

"A little. I was born and reared there, sir."

"The hell ye war!" gasped the old man as he dropped the front legs of his chair. "Say, I used to run cattle to north of Agua Prieta, used to know about ever'body in that kentry, boy."

"Then you likely know Sam Barton?"

"Sam Barton? What you know about Sam Barton? He was one of the squar' cattlemen of them days.

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Used to run the Rafter B outfit. Knowed him most like he was my brother, in fact him and me done some hard fightin' and hard drinkin' together. Say, what ye know about Sam Barton?"

"A little," drawled the stranger. "A man generally knows a little about his father."

"Say," Old Joe worked his Adam's apple up and down under his hoary whiskers, "ye ain't one of them thar brats of Sam's as used to run 'round the Rafter B, air ye?"

"I'm one of them," the stranger grinned. "I'm the one branded Jim. I heard you lived here at Vernon, sir."

Holliday reached out a skinny hand and felt it pressed hard.

"Hey, thar! Ye needn't bust it jest 'cause ye're young and strong! Huh! And I figgered ye might be another cattle thief! If Sam Barton ever heard I thought sech a thing 'bout one of his sons he'd come all the way out hyar to kill me!"

"He likely would," Jim agreed. "He sent you his best regards, Mr. Holliday."

Old Joe sat for a minute in gentle retrospect, seeing the days through which he would never live again. He grinned and blinked.

"So ye air Sam's boy, Jim, eh? Ye wasn't much more'n knee-high to a road-runner last time I recollect ye. What the hell ye doin' away out hyar, Jim?"

Old Joe wanted to ask a hundred questions about the Nueces and its people as he had known them, but there was a new urge in his old brain. It was beginning to appear as if his savage prayers had been answered, at least in part. What he had heard at the end of ten minutes left him amazed.

"So ye sarved an enlistment in the rangers, eh?" he chuckled. "Wal, I'll be gol-durned!"

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"Three years in the rangers," said Jim. "I'm going on twenty-seven now."

There was such fond admiration in the old man's eyes that he might have been regarding a son of his own.

"Ye done it with honour to the sarvice!" he declared.

"I hope I did, sir."

"Hope? Ye know durned well ye did! Durn ye, what ye doin' way out hyar?"

The answer to this question convinced Joe Holliday that his prayers had indeed been answered. He had prayed for youth to return to himself that he might do the job. This was impossible, but now a man had come to do it for him.

"They're a tough outfit," he confided. "Seven or eight of 'em, and not a one but ought to been hung years ago, Jim." He told about the Red Gash gang, every member of which he knew because of their visits to Vernon when they drove in stolen cattle. "And I jest had to set hyar and watch 'em! Ye expect to wipe 'em all out, boy?"

Barton said that was one of his purposes. Old Joe demanded to be told what the other was.

"Oh, I want to take a look at the country, sir," Jim smiled. "My feet got to itching, and when I got this offer to ride out this way——"

"If ye ain't durned keerful ye won't ride back," warned the old man. "I'm tellin' you this outfit's as tough as any we had to deal with on the Nueces or the Rio Grande, Jim. How many men ye got with ye?"

Jim Barton's bronzed face broke into a slow smile.

"How many men does a ranger usually take along, Mr. Holliday?"

"Wal, gol-durn!" cackled Holliday softly, yet with

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much mirth. "Of course a ranger don't usually take along anybody but hisself! So ye air goin' to tackle this hyar job alone, eh?"

He forgot the questions he had meant to ask. He could ask them later. He hurried through a story of how cattle were stolen in Harlan Valley, driven across the San Martins and sold here. It was a detailed account of what Jim had learned when he had been asked to come to Arizona.

"Did ye see an old pizen sidewinder settin' up thar as ye was ridin' in?" old Joe demanded savagely. "He was settin' on that porch of hisn, t'other side of the street. Reckon he's thar yet."

Jim replied that he had seen a man sitting under the wooden awning. Holliday leaned tensely forward.

"That's Lije Ford! He's the hombre as makes it profitable for that Red Gash gang to rustle cattle acrost the mountains and sell 'em hyar. Thar's a thousand dollars reward if ye put Lije Ford in jail and keep him thar, Jim. Ye kin kill him if ye want to and the reward'll be the same."

Jim said he had not heard of a reward on Elijah Ford. The old man grimaced, then winked significantly.

"Thar's a thousand reward, jest the same. Ye git Ford, and ye git the man as makes it possible for all that rustlin' to be done. If thar was an officer on this side of the mountains worth his salt, Ford'd been hung or put in jail long ago."

"Then he——"

"He's got more money than any other man in this hyar kentry," supplied Joe. "Mean as he is—and that's meaner'n skunk pizen—he's got political influence, too. It's said he's managed to get Jake Barrett elected sheriff of this hyar county three times. Ye likely see how the land lays?"

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Jim smiled and nodded.

"Then there's not much chance of getting the sheriff from Benton to stop this cattle stealing, eh, especially as the cattle are rustled in the next county to south?"

"Thar ain't no chance a-tall! It's likely old Ford splits moderate with Barrett jest to keep him from tryin' to horn in occasionally to make it look like he's doin' his duty as a sheriff. Say, hell's filled with better sheriffs'n Jake Barrett, and its hottest places are filled with men like Lije Ford!"

Jim Barton's nature, coupled with his three years' experience as Texas ranger, made it impossible for him to under-estimate his present desperate assignment or to think of deserting it.

Holliday told more about the Red Gash gang and its connection with the meanest and richest man in Puma County.

"And don't ye think for one minute that old sidewinder's influence ends hyar, Jim! I hear tell as how Sheriff McCracken across the mountains owes Lije Ford money."

"That," Jim mused, "might explain why the sheriff of San Martin County has made no effort to clean out this gang, eh?"

"What else?" old Joe snorted. "From what I hear tell, McCracken ain't much more'n a big tub of guts."

As he listened, Jim tried to weigh fully what he was hearing and what he had already heard. Presently he said:

"Do you think I am in danger here, Mr. Holliday? If I am, I want to be on the lookout against it."

The old man compressed his wrinkled lips as he fondly regarded the young man before him.

"Ye're in plenty of danger hyar, boy. That is if Ford finds out why ye're hyar. Once he knows it, he'll

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have ye killed before ye ever reach the foot of the San Martins yonder. Ye take my advice and ride round the east end of the mountains and don't go through the pass that'll take ye right through Red Gash Valley, Jim. And ye best not let Lije Ford suspect why ye're hyar."

With a calm that made the old man's admiration greater, the newcomer weighed this advice.

"No," he said, "I think I'll cut through the pass. And while I'm here I want to have a little talk with Ford. I may want to have him sell me a herd of rustled cattle."

CHAPTER III

LIJE FORD was fidgeting minutes before the stranger moved from behind the adobe to his horse. With Ford any person talking long with Joe Holliday gave cause for impatience and suspicion.

Jim Barton was too far away to be heard by the buyer of stolen cattle as he turned his horse and spoke to the old man.

"Don't ye let Ford suspect ye know me a-tall," warned Holliday. "That'd queer yer whole game, and likely mean ye'd never leave this hyar town alive, Jim."

"I'll take care of that," said Jim as he gripped the horn. "See you to-night as planned?"

"Ye sneak in the back way like I told ye. The house'll be dark."

As he rode up the street Jim mulled over what he had learned. He had discovered more than he had

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expected to discover here at the beginning, but it was not going to be an easy fight. He reined in before where the wizened cattle buyer sat. Ford's pale eyes were not cordial.

"Howdy," offered Jim.

"'Day," Ford grunted.

Jim dismounted and dropped the bridle reins.

"You're Elijah Ford?"

"If I ain't, I ain't nobody else! That any business of yours?"

"It may be," Jim said affably. "That is if you want to do a little business, Mr. Ford."

"What sort?"

"Cattle."

Ford said he had no cattle. His business was the buying and selling of range land. Jim looked disappointed. He sat down upon the edge of the small porch. He felt that the hot, dry air tingled with suspicion and antagonism.

"I was told in Big Valley that you bought and sold cattle, Mr. Ford."

"Yeah? Who told you that, stranger?"

Jim explained that he had met Sheriff Barrett in Big Valley. The sheriff had said that Lije Ford dealt in cattle.

"You know Barrett?"

"I can't claim I know him well. Met him as I was riding about. I happened to mention I could use a couple of hundred fat steers if the price was right. What the sheriff said made me take the long ride over here. He said he was about sure you could sell me those cattle."

Ford was tempted, but not to where he cast aside his caution. He had heretofore profited by being cautious. He masked his inner rage and tried not to look down the street.

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"You stopped to talk with old Holliday down there," he muttered. "Why didn't you ask him where you could get some steers?"

Jim explained that he had merely stopped to ask directions of the old man. Ford's eyes narrowed.

"You don't know that old——?" he demanded.

Jim made his eyes widen with surprise, and his grin was incredulous.

"I never saw the old codger until a while ago, Mr. Ford."

"You took a hell of a long time to ask him directions, it seems to me!"

"Well, it was quite a while," Jim admitted. "I thought so myself. But you know how old-timers like to gas. I didn't even ask his name."

"Huh! Didn't miss much!" Ford snorted. "It's Joe Holliday, if you want to know. He's meaner'n rat poison, too! Worst man in the country to raise trouble. Been so crooked all his life he figures everybody else is crooked, too!"

Jim nodded and said he knew some men were that way.

"Not like old Holliday!" Ford grunted. "He's so old he ain't got nothin' to do but meddle in honest men's business and raise trouble. If you want my opinion, he ought to have died years ago."

"Maybe you're right, Mr. Ford. How about those steers?"

"What steers?"

"The two hundred I want to buy."

Ford compressed his thin lips as he pondered. Here was a stranger who looked as if he might have real money.

"What's your name and where do you belong?"

Jim gave his name and said he lived in Winslow, which was half-truth. He added that he bought cattle

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when he could find the right ones at the right prices. From where he sat he could look through the dingy little office to the dingy living-quarters behind.

"What you willin' to pay for fat steers?" Ford ventured cautiously.

"Three or four year olds?"

"Yes."

Jim replied that he would pay twenty-five dollars a head for good steers of those ages. Ford now admitted that he had a few cattle. Jim thrilled at this admission, for he knew the dealer had no stock of his own.

"Out on the range, Mr. Ford?"

"Sure, out on my range!" snapped the dealer. "Figure I keep my cattle here in town?"

"Naturally not," Jim grinned in apology.

They talked for half an hour, Ford with much caution and admitting nothing. At last he said:

"You come back this evenin', say about eight. I'll let you know then whether I can sell you any cattle, Barton."

Jim said this suited him, and asked where he might leave his horse, and find accommodation for himself.

"Feed corral just round that corner to the left," Ford pointed out. "There's a place that calls itself a hotel."

He watched intently until horse and man had disappeared round the corner towards the feed corral. Then he rose and went inside. From the rear doorway he called softly to a Mexican boy who played in the dust thirty yards away. Ford, who could never part with a penny unless it would bring double value in return, gave the boy a copper cent.

"Jose," he ordered, "you find Mex Malloy and tell him I want to see him pronto. You'll find him in Elkins' saloon, I reckon."

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The boy hurried away, skirting the rear of the houses, according to instructions. Ford did not return to the front porch, but stopped in his office. Sitting down, he took a pinch of snuff from a tin box and shoved the fiery stuff over his thin upper lip. He had not waited many minutes before there was a heavy step at the rear of the shack. A gruff voice called cautiously:

"Lije!"

"In here," Ford grunted. "Come on in."

The man who entered was of massive build, but not tall. His big hands dangled to his knees and his right forearm raked against a low-slung holster, the end of which was tied about a thick thigh.

Upon his massive face a huge reddish nose bent towards the upward-thrust, squarish chin, and at each side of the chin an end of reddish moustache dangled. His eyes, low at their outer ends, were agate in colour, and apparently without emotion. His sombrero was pulled down, almost obliterating an already low forehead. His shaggy reddish eyebrows bristled.

"Wal?" growled the gunman, who was Ford's bodyguard.

"Set down, Mex."

Mex Malloy made an old chair creak as he dropped into it. He contemptuously spat tobacco juice upon the dusty floor. His eyes betrayed no change as he heard Ford tell of the stranger who had just arrived, and of how that stranger had stopped to talk with Joe Holliday.

"That old——!" grunted Malloy.

"It didn't suit me at all!" Ford snarled. "At least the story this Barton told about stoppin' to talk for fifteen minutes with Holliday didn't suit me. You know what Holliday is, Mex."

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"Yeah, the trouble-makin' old——! Killed him long ago if he hadn't been so old, Lije."

Ford whined that the man's age was deplorable. It would be difficult to shoot a man as old as he and yet make it look like self-defence.

"Yeah!" Malloy spat again. "If you want me to rub out old Joe, I won't do it, Lije. He'll die soon as it is. All we gotta do is wait."

Ford snarled that he did not want Holliday killed, though he wished he would die within ten seconds.

"Mex, the man I want you to get is that hombre that just rode in," Ford declared as if he were directing a cattle deal. "He don't ring true to me, and if we let him stay here——"

"Yeah, I see," muttered Mex. "You want him rubbed out, eh?"

They made a strange pair, the miserly thief, small, wizened, cunning; and the killer, big, callous, sinister. Each was dependent upon the other. At least Ford had never found a more efficient killer. He explained now that Barton claimed to be here after cattle. He wanted two hundred fat steers.

"Wal," Malloy grunted.

Ford said with a curse that he was not looking for any cattle buyers. He could get rid of all the stock he got.

"Here's what I'm scared of, Mex. That —— may be from the Cattlemen's Association, or he may belong to the Arizona Rangers. You see we got to protect the boys in Red Gash."

"Why not say you gotta protect yourself, Lije?" the gunman disputed.

"Well, what's the difference? If I protect Littrell and his men I'm lookin' out for myself, ain't I?"

"Aw, sure. So you want me to rub out this new feller, eh?"

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Ford callously declared that this was what he wanted.

"Will you do the job, Mex?"

"Wal, that depends. How much extry you willin' to pay me for it, Lije?"

Ford said he would pay fifty dollars for the job. Malloy, as if bickering over the price of shooting a worthless horse, stood out for a hundred. Shooting a stranger naturally involved a little risk. They compromised at seventy-five, which was to be paid as soon as Barton had been removed as a possible menace to Ford's future success.

"Best make it appear like you was forced to do it, Mex. Make it look that way, and I'll tend to the rest with Sheriff Barrett."

Malloy grunted that he guessed he still knew how to kill a man and keep out of jail.

"Sure, I ain't questionin' your ability, Mex," Ford chuckled, his small mirth making a metallic, rasping sound out of his bony little chest.

Malloy asked when the killing was to be done. Ford said any time to-night would be satisfactory.

"Somethin' gives me a hunch this hombre ain't what he claims. I want to make sure he don't cross the San Martins. If he should join forces with Harlan and Nesbit——"

"Things might get uncomfortable for the boys in Red Gash, eh?"

"That's it. I like them boys over at Red Gash. Feel it my duty to protect 'em, Mex."

"Aw, sure!" Mex agreed sardonically. "You always was a thoughtful feller about other men, Lije. See how easy it is for you to ask me to rub this gent out."

As cunning as Ford, yet with honest purpose, old Joe Holliday went into his adobe through the rear

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doorway as soon as Jim Barton had ridden away. From the shadows back of a deeply recessed window he watched Jim talk with Ford. He had misgivings about the wary cattle buyer believing Jim was here to get fat steers.

"That old sidewinder ain't easy to fool," muttered the old man into his hoary whiskers.

He watched Jim ride away, disappear, but did not relax his vigil.

"That thar young feller's the son of the best friend I ever had," he told his whiskers. "I gotta look out for him."

From where he watched, Joe could see the Mexican boy playing in the dust. He saw the boy suddenly tense, then hurry towards the rear of Ford's shack. Presently he saw the boy again, this time going towards the back of Elkins' saloon. In a few minutes Mex Malloy appeared.

"Uh-huh!" muttered Holliday. "So he up and sends for his hired killer, does he? This hyar don't look so good!"

The old man was in a troubling dilemma. He could not hurry to Barton and warn him without further exciting Ford's suspicion. If Malloy had been summoned so he might be ordered to kill Jim, he might loose his deadly bursts of gunfire at any moment. Furthermore, Jim had said he did not want his real purpose here revealed yet.

Old Joe tugged angrily at his beard and muttered. He had to do something. He looked hard towards his six-shooters, at his rifle and shotgun. All the weapons had seen much service. No, he could not go out and openly join forces with Jim Barton.

"Durned if I won't do it!" he swore. "I'll do it pervided it looks like Mex is after him! I'll drop Mex with a rifle slug, by gol-durn!"

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Old Joe had so long stood for law and order that he shrank from deliberately shooting even a brutal killer who rubbed out men for pay. Yet he had to protect the son of his old friend.

He breathed more freely when he failed to see Malloy reappear after ten minutes, still more freely when Jim rounded the corner from the direction of the feed corral and slanted across towards the hotel.

"I gotta get word to him," Joe told himself. He went to the rear doorway.

Directly back of his adobe was a small one in which a Mexican family lived. Joe's heart sank, for no member of this family was visible. He did not want to go to the little adobe lest he attract Ford's attention. He was about ready to risk it, however, when Manuela, the mother of the large brood, appeared in her front doorway. Holliday called to her, and beckoned peremptorily. Manuela waddled across the yard.

"There's an amigo of mine at the hotel," old Joe explained. "He just rode in. Want you to take a note to him, Manuela."

She said she would be glad to oblige. The old man hastily scribbled a warning on a piece of wrapping paper, folded it. He handed it and a dollar to the woman, whose eyes widened in gratitude.

"You best go back to your own casa and wait for a few minutes, Manuela. Then make for the back of the hotel," the old man advised shrewdly.

"Sí, sí," she agreed. "I do as you say, Señor Holliday. Muchas gracias."

Ford's pale eyes missed little within their range. They did not miss Manuela as she left her own house and hurried towards Holliday's. He kept his gaze on that stretch of fifty yards, and said nothing to the

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tobacco-chewing Malloy until the Mexican woman reappeared.

"Aw hell!" the killer scoffed. "She's likely been over to see if the old —— wants her to cook some chili for him. She cooks for him half the time."

Ford hoped this were true, yet he more savagely hoped his guess had not been wrong.

"Huh!" he suddenly snorted. "There she is again, Mex! Look! She's goin' towards the back of the hotel. That's where that feller Barton's goin' to stay while he's here. I told him to go there."

The brutal Malloy argued that he failed to see how the actions of the Mexican woman had any bearing on the work he himself was to do.

"Now you look here!" Ford snarled. "That ——, Joe Holliday, he sees you come in here by the back way, so he puts two and two together, damn him! Now he's sendin' word to Barton to warn him about you and me. I knowed from the start there was somethin' between Holliday and that newcomer! It's all the more reason I got to get rid of him."

Malloy rose with what seemed at the same time lugubrious slowness and pantherish agility. He spat.

"Wal, we'll get rid of him!" He spat again, then lumbered out by the route he had taken to come in.

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CHAPTER IV

MANUELA first encountered Jorge, the Mexican cook at the hotel, and explained her errand. She was referred to Simpson, the owner, and lastly escorted to where Jim Barton was in one of the five rooms. Manuela offered the crumpled note, explaining that it had come from Señor Holliday.

"Gracias," said Jim. He gave her a dollar, for which she thanked him profusely while she wished that Americanos had many messages for her to carry.

"There is nothing more I can do for you, señor?" she asked.

"No más," said Jim. "Gracias."

He shoved the note into a pocket of his vest as if it were of no consequence, for he did not want to satisfy the curiosity of the hotel man, who lingered. He did not know whether Simpson were a Ford henchman, a friend of Joe Holliday, or neutral.

"Know old man Holliday?" Simpson probed.

"Met him as I rode in," Jim said. "He was the first man I happened to run across when I rode into town. Stopped to ask him some questions."

When the hotel man had reluctantly departed, Jim smoothed out the note. He read:

> "Beware of a big feller that looks like a goriller. He wears a red mustash and totes a gun low and tied down. He's Lije Ford's hired killer and I think he is out to git ye."

"Well, well," Jim mused. "A big fellow that looks like a gorilla, eh?"

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He smiled as he recalled he had taken Ford for a man who was not easily fooled. Holliday had said Ford was dangerous, but had not mentioned a bodyguard.

"When a man has to keep another man to do his fightin' he ain't much good as a general rule," Jim mused. "I reckon I'll have to see pronto what this gorilla hombre looks like."

He had planned to remain in Vernon only long enough to get certain information, then ride on. He had the information now and would be ready to ride early to-morrow, but he did not want to run. Running from trouble was not a part of his character.

The dingy room had one window, opening on to a dirty alley. Jim drew the crooked shade at the window, lit a lamp, though it was bright day outside. By the light of the lamp he shaved leisurely, as if no possible gunman were waiting outside. He put on the clean shirt he had brought in his saddle-roll, retied his blue bandana. He next removed six cartridges from as many loops of his belt, and put the cartridges into a pocket of his overalls. He poked the barrel of his forty-four inside the waistband.

"Mighty hot to wear a coat," he mused, "but I reckon I'd better wear it."

He carefully tried to smooth the wrinkles from the light gray coat he had carried back of his cantle. He donned the coat and combed his unruly light hair. In the fly-specked office he encountered the bewhiskered Simpson, who informed him that dinner was ready.

"Suits me," Jim drawled as he kept watch on the street doorway. "I'm plenty hungry. You have a sleepy little town here."

"Too durned sleepy!" Simpson declared. "Where

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you goin' from here, Mr. Barton? Or do you 'tend to stop for a time?"

Jim ignored these questions as if he had not heard them, and said:

"Have much trouble round here?"

"What sort of trouble?" Simpson parried.

"Oh, shootin', and cattle stealin'."

"None a-tall! This here's a mighty peaceable sort of place, stranger."

Jim agreed that it looked it, and went into the little dining-room, which was shadowy and comparatively cool. He discovered he was the only guest, and took a seat where he could command both doorways.

On leaving Ford's office, Malloy slouched along the short street to Elkins' saloon, which was opposite the hotel. Here he encountered Nick Burge, the town constable. Burge, who had once been a second-rate cowboy, was a little man with an inordinately large moustache. He prized this moustache highly, as if it helped to give him authority. Nick was very proud of his job, for which he received thirty dollars a month from the county, and he was mortally afraid of big Mex Malloy, the gun-fighter.

"Wal, how are you, Mr. Malloy?" Nick inquired.

"Aw, not so bad," Malloy growled, grinning. "I been worse off many a time."

Malloy took a seat on the whittled bench between two of the posts that helped support the wooden awning. He sat in such a position that he commanded the hotel entrance. To be cordial, Nick took a seat beside him, and looked out of the end of a pale eye.

"See there's a stranger just rid in," he ventured.

"Heard about him," Malloy grunted unsociably as he kept watch on the adobe across the street.

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There was a short silence, which the constable broke.

"What sort of feller you reckon he is, Mex?"

"Damned cattle thief, likely! At least I got wind that way."

Nick ejaculated his surprise and looked pleadingly at the gun-fighter. He had seen the stranger at the feed corral, and he had not looked like an outlaw.

"Huh? You mean to say you got wind the feller's a rustler?"

"That's what I said! I got wind he's a wanted man, Nick."

"The hell you did! You figure I orter take him into custody, Mex?"

The gunman seemed to ponder this question. Presently he grunted:

"Let's wait and see what the jigger looks like. If he's the hombre I think he is, I'll likely have a score to settle with him myself."

Nick had shuddered with the thought that there was a wanted outlaw in town and he might have to arrest him. Now he grabbed hold of some courage.

"Say, Mex, in case I need any help, can I deputise you?"

"Me?" snarled Malloy as his yellowish eyes glinted with the lust to kill.

"Sure. If he's a real mal hombre and handy with his pistol I may need a little help. Can I rely on you, Mex? I can make you a deputy for the time bein'."

"Aw right!" Malloy growled. He smiled inwardly at the ease with which a man could get out of murder. As a deputy he would have the legal right to kill a man he could claim he suspected of being an outlaw. "I'll help you out if you need help, but you best lemme do the first talkin' to this mal hombre, Nick."

Nick was so agreeable to this generous suggestion

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that he wanted to laugh. He had tried to be a good officer, but there had been a few times—especially when men were here from Red Gash—that he had wanted to run and hide.

"Yeah, you do the fust talkin' to him, Mex," he encouraged. "As my deputy you'll have the legal right to do it. I'll back your play as head marshal."

For nearly half an hour Nick talked excitedly of how they would arrest the outlaw newcomer. Malloy muttered occasional agreement.

"Say, looky here, Mex! Don't you figger we orter have a warrant? I can hurry and get one from Judge Brown."

"Warrant hell!" Malloy sneered. "You don't need a warrant to arrest a killer! If this feller's the one I think he is, he's murdered half a dozen men. Maybe we won't need no warrant."

Malloy chuckled in silent mirth, much pleased because he was going to kill a man so dead a warrant would be useless. Vernon was on the outskirt of civilisation, and few questions would be asked about a newcomer who died with his boots on.

Down the street a hundred yards Joe Holliday was watching. He stood in the shadow back of one of his unglazed windows. Though he was not feeling very uneasy since Manuela had returned to say she had delivered the note to the stranger, he had a Winchester within reach.

"Settin' where he can watch the hotel, ain't he?" Joe sneered. "And he's got Nick Burge thar, and as usual Nick's skeered outen his next three meals! Hell of a man for a constable! If it hadn't been for Lije Ford he'd never had the job. Him a peace officer!"

Old Joe sardonically compared Burge with the sort of peace officer he himself had been years ago.

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"Hell! A drunk squaw'd make him run and crawl into a hole! He'd lick Mex Malloy's boots if Mex told him to. Hell's full of vermin like him!"

Holliday became suddenly alert. He leaned forward and rested his hands on his knees. He reached out to make sure the rifle was handy.

"Gol-darn it!" he muttered. "Wish I could see the front of that thar hotel!"

It was at this moment that Jim Barton, rolling a cigarette, had stepped into the doorway of the hotel. He stood there as if paying no attention to what he saw across the street in front of the saloon. Over there, not thirty paces away, sat a burly man who had a reddish moustache and actually looked like a gorilla.

"There he is now!" Nick whispered. "He is a mean lookin' ——, ain't he, Mex?"

"One of the mean, slick kind," Malloy grunted.

"Is he the feller?" Nick stifled an urge to run. "Is he the outlaw you figgered he was, Mex?"

"He's the murderin' ——! Yeah, he's the man you want, Nick. He's bad medicine with his guns, though."

"He ain't got no gun," Nick protested hopefully. "Least I don't see none in sight."

Again Malloy chuckled silently.

"Don't you figger that mean hombre ain't heeled," he warned. "I know him and his breed."

For a minute the brutal gun-fighter remained seated, revelling in the swiftness with which the tall, good-looking stranger was going to be eased from the earth. Then he rose slowly and clicked shut the big stock knife with which he had been idly whittling.

Nick, too, rose, but shakily. He moved a little to the left. If bullets were going to fly from the other

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side of the street, he did not want to stop one of them.

Crouched a little, and with massive head thrust forward, Mex Malloy began to move slowly across the street. Nick attempted to keep pace, but shifted a little farther to the left.

As if he had decided to throw his cigarette off the board walk, Jim Barton moved to its edge. He took the stub from between his lips and tossed it away.

Down the street Joe Holliday forgot he was to keep hidden while he watched. He grabbed his old Winchester and shambled hurriedly to the front of the adobe, muttering:

"If he gits that boy I'll kill him so durned dead he'll be worse'n a skunk that's been dead a year, by gol-durn!"

Diagonally across the street and fifty yards away, Lije Ford had come out and taken his worn arm-chair under the wooden awning. He had no weapon. His theory and practice in the extermination of enemies, proved and potential, was simpler and more effective. It was cheaper and far less embarrassing to hire his killing done. Mex Malloy was an efficient killer.

Sight of the constable just beyond Malloy gave Ford a warming pleasure. The presence of the officer would give the killing a sort of legal atmosphere.

Joe Holliday could now see Jim Barton clearly, and it gave him much satisfaction that the son of his old friend did not seem afraid, though the deadliest gunfighter who had ever disgraced Vernon's dusty main street was not twenty paces away now.

Old Joe took a second or two from what was slowly approaching deadly climax to look at Lije Ford.

"Ye pizen piece of skunk meat!" he muttered into his whiskers. "If that hired killer of yourn gits Jim, the fust thing I'm goin' to do is kill ye! Then I'll drap Malloy!"

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CHAPTER V

Of the two ranches controlling all Harlan Valley and the adjoining mesa and foothill range, the Bar H was the nearer to Maguey. In fact Harlan's cattle ranged even beyond the town, which was ten miles from his ranch headquarters. The home place of the Circle N, owned by John Nesbit, was twenty miles east of the headquarters of the Bar H.

The Harlan home was about thirty miles from Red Gash Valley, the Circle N some ten miles farther from the rustler hangout by direct route. The Bar H house was a sprawling adobe, well shaded by cottonwood and catalpa trees because it used the waters of Red Gash Creek. At first the ranch-house had been a two-room structure, but Tom Harlan had added to it as his cattle and fortune had increased. The corrals and stables had grown apace with the ranch-house.

About the middle of the hot forenoon Lanky Higgins and Windy Irwin were breaking colts in one of the corrals, now and then pausing to swear and wipe sweat and dust from their sun-reddened faces. It was ten o'clock when they turned the last of the three bronco colts into an adjoining pasture, came back and perched on top of the corral fence.

"By golly," Windy complained. "Some times I think a cowpuncher ain't got no sense a-tall."

"Jest why?"

"Well, if they did have they wouldn't be cowpunchers! It ain't nothin' but hard work and jolts. I'm jolted up right now till my insides feel like beef stew with plenty gravy."

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"You likely made a mistake," drawled Lanky. "You orter been sheriff of some place, so's you could've had a soft job."

"Sheriff!" Windy paused to meditate. "Well, cowboy, I wouldn't mind bein' a sheriff if I had a job as soft as the one Pat McCracken holds down in Maguey. But the hell of it is all sheriffs' jobs ain't like that."

"That," Lanky philosophised, "depends on whether a man does his sworn duty. I reckon if a sheriff done what he was paid to do, his job'd be about as hard as the ones we got now."

Windy snorted in supreme disgust.

"Well, Pat McCracken don't do nothin' except politics, and warm his chair! If he'd been worth his salt he'd run them outlaws out of Red Gash long before now."

"The trouble," declared Lanky, "is likely in his guts."

"Well, he's got plenty guts."

"Yeah, but no sand in 'em!"

As they talked they gazed idly down the road towards Maguey. At length their eyes made out a dust-cloud. Lanky remarked that it was caused by a buggy or buckboard.

"Buckboard," contended Windy.

"Buggy," Lanky disputed. "Even from here a feller can see that the top's up. Some feller likely tryin' to keep the sun from spoilin' his purty complexion."

Once they had identified the rig they were angry and sardonic. There was but one top buggy in Harlan Valley, and every cowboy and rancher and Mexican knew who owned it.

"It's that no-account George McCracken again!" Windy declared with a curse.

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"And a-comin' to see her again!" added Lanky. "Won't she be pleased?"

"About as pleased as you'd be to have a rattler in the seat of your britches."

They, like the other riders on the Bar H, knew that for months the shiftless, irresponsible son of the sheriff had been coming regularly to the ranch, and for one purpose.

"You know," Windy remarked, "if I was a squaw-man and had a darter I wouldn't let her marry that bull snake."

"Well, me, if I was the ugliest gal in the world and had to get wed I'd stay an old maid before I'd up and hitch to him!"

For a few minutes their opinions of the son of the sheriff were expressed freely and with much heat and contempt. Then Windy sneered:

"Imagine him comin' to see her!"

"Imagine her a-lettin' him!"

"Lettin' him? Say, she can't help herself. He's the same sort of pest as a blowfly after fresh meat in summer."

They argued now over whether Nancy Harlan encouraged George McCracken, decided they did not know.

"I do know I'd sure like to cave in his face!" swore Windy.

"Yeah, and then make him go to work punchin' cows."

"Aw, he couldn't even wrangle staked-out horses! He couldn't do nothin' except look purty, cowboy!"

"Purty! I'd like to see anybody make that idiot look that away!"

While they watched the rig approach at a fast clip, they decided they should warn Nancy of the approaching visitor, so Windy whistled shrilly three

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times. Presently a girl, tall and slender, sauntered from the ranch-house. She stopped as she saw the two cowboys perched atop the fence.

"What do you two want?"

"You," called Lanky.

"Got some important news for you," added Windy.

As she crossed the yard they whispered to each other.

"She's purty as hell in that blue dress."

"And look at the way her hair's all brown and soft and curly, cowboy!"

"And them brown eyes, too."

"And her entire purty face!"

"And lovely form!" enthused Windy. "There ain't a curve in her that ain't just where it orter be."

"Yeah. If I was rich I'd sure up and marry her."

"You would like hell!"

"Well, I ain't rich."

"And you sure ain't handsome, cowboy!"

Nancy stopped and smiled up at them, the sun reflected from the golden tan of her piquant face.

"What did you want?" she inquired. "Is that buckskin gelding going to make a good bronc for me?"

"He ain't," replied Lanky. "Too frackshus."

"Or that sorrel?"

"Irresponsible and cranky," answered Windy. "We didn't want to see you about those hosses, anyway."

"What did you want me for then? I had hoped that buckskin would tame easily."

"We ain't in no mood to talk about hosses," growled Lanky.

"No, but we figgered," added Windy, "that you might be interested in what's comin', Nancy."

She furrowed her smooth forehead.

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"I don't know what you fools are talking about!"

They assured her drolly that they had only her best interests in mind, that their hearts were filled with solicitude for her.

"You idiots!" she laughed. "You're such thoughtful boys! As usual I know you have some good news for me. Have you decided to let me be the first to know you are going to run the rustlers out of Red Gash?"

The cowboys looked soberly at each other.

"Was that what we wanted her for, Windy?"

"I ain't quite sure," said Windy, "but I got a feelin' it wasn't. Was we talkin' about rustlers?"

"Only on the side, sort of like a side-bet in poker."

"Then tell me what you were talking about," the girl commanded. "I was reading a good book, and you called me out here just for this!"

"For that!" corrected Windy, and pointed down the road.

"What?"

Now Lanky lifted a long arm and pointed.

"For that," he drawled sorrowfully. "We wanted you to see what was comin'."

Confronting them, Nancy had stood with her back to the Maguey road. She hopped to the bottom board of the corral fence, clutched the top one, turned her head.

"Oh, Lord!" she groaned.

The cowboys stared at her in mock surprise.

"Why, Nancy, ain't you goin' to be glad to see him?"

"Didn't you send for him?"

She jumped to the ground and looked up at them. Her brown eyes flashed.

"Would I like to have another attack of smallpox if I'd already had it fifty times?" she demanded. "You

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fools! And you called me out here just to tell me it's coming!"

"It?" queried Windy. "It wears pants and walks on two legs."

"And calls itself a man," added Lanky.

Windy rubbed his chin.

"I wonder if we been mistaken," he muttered. "Maybe after all he is just one of them its."

Nancy was pale now. She bit at her lower lip as if to hold back hot, indignant words. She whirled and started towards the house, but went only a little way before she stopped, turned.

"You two find something to do!" she ordered. "I don't want you in my sight when it gets here! Get a move on!"

She did march indignantly to the house now, almost ran inside. On the fence the two cowboys grinned at each other.

"Little Georgie's goin' to be plumb welcome, ain't he?"

"Plumb welcome. And she told us to find ourselves a job."

There were numerous jobs they could find without searching far, but just now they did not want to find even one. They wanted to welcome George McCracken in their own way, though they were not sure just what that way was.

"We could kick him in the seat of the pants," ventured Windy, "seein' as how his comin' is plumb distasteful to her."

"Or cut his throat for him!" Lanky snorted.

"Or just turn him round and show him the way home."

"Or lambaste hell out of him and tell him not to come back no more pronto!"

They voiced several other suggestions they hoped

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would add to McCracken's discomfiture, but not one seemed the right one.

"Tell you what!" Windy laughed at last.

"Shoot! We gotta do somethin'."

Windy began by explaining that the Bar H had never appropriately welcomed such visitors as the one who was approaching. It should be done with dignity and decorum.

"With a shotgun!" Lanky disagreed. "And her loaded with salt and birdshot."

"Nope! With proper decorum and dignity!"

"We ain't got them things, have we?"

Windy explained his plan. His partner grinned, then chuckled.

"Which one you want to be, Lank, footman or butler?"

"Which one you want to be, Windy?"

They agreed to flip a coin to decide, and slid from the fence. Windy tossed up a quarter.

They knew well the cottonwood to which McCracken would hitch his team. It was the one with the two iron rings in it. They were there when the son of the sheriff stopped his span with the end of the buggy-tongue two feet from the tree.

George was of medium height and inclined towards pudginess. His somewhat pasty face was broad and flat His protruding eyes were half-vacuous in their eagerness and awareness of his own importance. This time he wore a pale gray coat and trousers with linen duster over them. His soft shirt was pink and his flowing tie mauve. His taffy-coloured hair was almost hidden under a new Stetson with three meticulous dents in the peaked crown.

"Hello, Windy. Hello, Lank," George hailed cordially. "Hitch the broncs for me, Windy. Here are the tie-ropes."

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Instead of obeying, Windy remained in front of the horses, his face wooden and grim, as wooden and grim as that of Lanky, who had stiffly taken a stand beside the right front wheel of the buggy.

George McCracken looked at them with perplexity and a little concern. Were they drunk? He glanced towards the ranch-house and felt a little indignant because no pretty girl had rushed out to meet him.

"Mr. McCracken, sir?" asked Windy. His back remained as stiff as if he had a ramrod for a spinal-cord.

McCracken gasped, then began to redden with rage.

"Who the hell do you think I am?" he demanded, and would have expressed much more indignation had his irate attention not been diverted by Lanky. The tall cowboy was bending stiffly at the hips.

"Pardon me, Mr. McCracken," he said, as if the opening of his lips would crack his wooden face, "but Miss Harlan desires that I inform you she is not at home, sir."

George was now very red. He had a slight suspicion that these fools were trying to make fun of him. His full lips twisted and his eyes began to gleam.

"What the hell are you talking about?" he demanded as he flung off a gaily embroidered gauntlet. He glared at Lanky, then at Windy, who bowed stiffly.

"Yes sir, Mr. McCracken." Windy snapped his mouth shut.

"If you will pardon me, sir," said Lanky after he had bent again, "Miss Harlan desires me to inform you she is not at home. I hope you are not disappointed, sir."

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CHAPTER VI

In the drab, sun-baked village of Vernon eighty miles away no comedy was being enacted. The curtain had rolled up on stark drama. Tragedy was in the wings awaiting its cue.

At one point of a triangle old Joe Holliday stood, his blue-veined hand gripping the barrel of his Winchester rifle. At another Elijah Ford sat grim and gloating over what was soon to be the elimination of another obstacle to his hoarding of money. He was serene and confident. Big Malloy had never yet failed him.

At the third point of the dramatic triangle Jim Barton stood as if not quite sure of what was occurring, though he was fully alive to the possibilities. He nonchalantly hooked a thumb into his waistband and looked at Malloy.

There was a deadly, contemptuous sneer on the gunman's massive face. His yellowish eyes were cold, steady. His crouch made his big, crooked hands dangle almost to his knees. The fingers of the right touched the end of the tied-down holster, ready to sweep up and jerk the heavy weapon from the cut-out leather.

Fifteen feet to Malloy's left, Nick Burge, the constable, came on slowly, shakily.

Malloy stopped twenty feet from the edge of the board walk, glared as if to make certain of the identity of the tall young man before him. His thick lips twisted back to reveal yellowish teeth.

"Why you —— son of a horsethief!" he snarled. "So you are here, are you?"

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"I reckon I'm here," Barton answered coolly. "Right glad to see you again, Red."

Malloy's big right hand twitched upward, dropped back. He peered as if momentarily puzzled. Then he loosed a volley of profanity.

"Red?" he finished. "What you mean by callin' me Red, you —— son of a horsethief?" It was part of his tactics, this baiting the man he intended to kill. "By Gawd, I ain't used to havin' ——es talk back to me this familiar way, you slick ——! What you mean by callin' me Red?"

On the edge of the board walk Jim Barton was a little paler, a little tenser, much more alert as he waited for the telegraph of eye.

"I reckoned," he drawled, "that you are Red Mitchell, parsano."

"Red Mitchell? Who the hell's he? I want to know whether I'm complimented or not, you horse-stealin' coyote!"

"Red Mitchell," returned Jim Barton quietly, "used to be one of the meanest horse thieves in West Texas, and one of the most cowardly killers. So you have changed your name out here, have you, Mitchell?"

Malloy cursed again.

"You claimin' I'm this here Mitchell hombre, eh? If you are, you can go for your damned hardware, you ——!"

"I'm not claimin'," Jim drawled, and smiled contemptuously. "I'm tellin' you that you are Red Mitchell, and the meanest, most cowardly killer this side of the Mississippi. Speakin' of hardware——"

"Well, what about hardware?" Malloy was momentarily puzzled, for he was now seeing somebody else than a tall, well-dressed tenderfoot. "Who the hell are you?"

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"Just a Texas man," Jim Barton drawled. "You see I've made a little study of the mal hombres who've left Texas because of the climate and other things. I'm really right pleased to run across you, Mitchell."

For a few harrowing seconds the killer wished he had not been so eager to undertake his present job. He had recognised a quality in the steady eyes of the man he had agreed to kill, and that recognition was not comforting. He knew, too, that if he "backed water" his prestige as a killer in this part of the country would be gone. What was more disquieting was the fear that this newcomer had really come to take Red Mitchell back to Texas.

"Go ahead! Arrest the ——!" the little town marshal sputtered. "You got the authority as my deputy, Mex!"

Jim shot half a cold look at Burge.

"You better keep out of this, hombrecito," he warned. "You ain't big enough to tote a gun."

Nick's dignity and vanity were so offended that he swept a hand towards the butt of his big Colt, but he had the forethought to sweep the hand higher and jerk angrily at an end of his massive moustache.

"This feller one of your deputies, hombrecito?" Jim taunted.

"Yeah, he is!" Nick quavered, and all but danced up and down. "I give him 'thority to arrest you, and I'll sure back his play!"

"It seems to me," Jim said, without taking his attention from the murderous Malloy, "that likely you use mighty poor judgment in the selection of your deputies. You might tell me what I'm to be arrested for, though."

"Huh? What for?" Nick sputtered. "You're 'rested for bein' a murderer and a hoss thief! If you got a gun on you, drop 'er! In the name of the law!"

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A cold shiver raced through big Mex Malloy's body. This tall man before him was too ominously unperturbed, too sure of himself, too much like a man who had faced many crises such as this. The killer in Malloy's soul clamoured for him to kill. He began to curse blasphemously in the hope of making the other man show fright.

"That'll do!" Jim snapped. "Another couple of words like that and I'll shoot you between the eyes, Mitchell!"

The gunman became silent. Then he sneered:

"So you'll drill me between the eyes, will you? Haw, haw!"

"Right between the eyes," drawled Jim. "Best drop that gun, Mitchell. I'm arresting you."

Burge's gasp of incredulity was drowned in the roar of guns. Malloy raked his big hand upward, but as he clawed the gun from its holster Jim Barton's right hand darted to the left and under his coat. He fired as he whipped the forty-four to the right. Malloy's Colt exploded as he swung it downward and his bullet sogged into the adobe wall above the door casing.

Malloy's big knees buckled. He knelt for a moment as if in final prayer, then slumped forward and rooted his big face in the dust.

Jim Barton's Colt moved to the right a second after it had exploded. He stepped from the board walk.

"Get your hand away from that gun, Marshal!" he barked. "That's it! Lift 'em!"

Burge, now pasty of face, sputtered that he was the marshal of Vernon. Nevertheless he shot his little hands into the air.

"See this here badge on my vest, durn ye?" he shouted. "What you mean killin' Mex Malloy? He was my deputy!"

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Though a crowd was beginning to gather, Jim turned back the left side of his coat. Burge gasped, and his eyes bulged.

"Naw? Naw?" he sputtered. "You ain't——"

"I am!" corrected Jim. "I reckoned a while ago you were too little to tote a gun, Marshal."

Before Burge could protest, had he been capable of it, his Colt was plucked from its holster. Jim rammed the barrel inside the band of his own overalls.

"You can keep the holster, hombrecito. Yeah, put your arms down before they get cramps."

Burge jerked down his arms. He sputtered, spat, stared at the distorted shape of the killer in the dust. A reddish spot was widening under Malloy's forehead. Burge's incredulous eyes turned back to the man before him. He swallowed as if his words kept choking him.

"You—you did shoot him 'tween the eyes!" he managed. "The whole—back of his head's blown off!"

Happy, squeaky little noises came from Ford's wizened chest as he watched. Though he could not hear what was being said up the street, he had a good idea what it was. Then as the two shots roared like one prolonged report he felt a spasm of still greater joy. Another enemy was gone!

But he saw Malloy buckle, kneel, pitch forward and lie still instead of the stranger. He gasped in utter amazement. This could not be so! Red Malloy had never before failed to kill his man, and with split-seconds to spare.

"Gawd!" Ford squeaked. "He's killed Mex!"

The next moment he saw old Joe Holliday shambling up the street with a rifle in his hand, and awoke to the realisation that something had to be

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done. He sprang from the low porch and ran as fast as his sinewy legs could work. His frantic feet soon put him apace with Holliday, who turned his hoary head.

"Ye durned little sidewinder," Holliday sneered. "Yer gun sure kicked back on ye this time, didn't it, Ford?"

Ford did not answer except with a venomous look. He was ten paces ahead of the older man as they neared the forming rim of Americans and Mexicans about where Mex Malloy lay in the dust and a tall, sun-browned stranger stood as if nothing unusual in his life had occurred.

"Burge! Burge!" Ford squeaked as he slid to a stop and pointed an excited hand towards Jim Barton. "Arrest this man! Arrest him for murder!"

It was then that Joe Holliday burst through the ring of men. He rammed the stock of his rifle hard against the ground and leaned on it weakly for a moment. Then he chuckled as he looked at what lay on the ground.

"Wal, by gol-durn, he killed ye, didn't he, Jim Barton? Ye sure had me skeered fer a few minutes a while ago, boy!"

Burge stood, vacant-eyed and shaking. He might have been paralysed on his feet or in a trance for all his action and volubility. Ford turned to him, shook him.

"What's wrong with you, Nick? Don't you know your duty? Arrest this man for the murder of Mex Malloy! Arrest him, damn you!"

"Yeah—yeah, Lije," Burge stammered. "I'll do it! I'll do it, but——"

Ford felt a hand drop on his shoulder. He spun about, looked into Jim Barton's cold blue eyes.

"Shut up!" Jim ordered, and to make sure he was

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heard, he slapped Ford's face. The cattle-buyer yelled and sputtered curses. He was slapped again.

"You crooked little runt!" Jim snarled. "You talk about arresting me!"

"I am goin' to have you arrested!" Ford shrilled, in a panic of fear now. "I saw you commit murder with my own eyes! I saw you shoot down Mex Malloy! You're goin' to hang for this!"

"Sure, I shot Malloy, as you know him here," drawled Jim, "but as for any arrests, I'm not to be in on that play."

"Say, ye-all looky here!" Holliday piped up. "If any feller makes a move to arrest that boy I'll drill him clean through the gizzard! Yeah, somebody just make a move!"

Lije Ford jerked his head about so he could see his most hated enemy. There was cold fire in old Joe's eyes, and he had a Winchester half-way to his shoulder.

"It's all right, I reckon, Mr. Holliday," Jim advised calmly.

"Ye're durned right it is!" retorted Holliday. "Boy, I'm backin' your play with my last white chip!"

Jim reached out and grasped a shoulder of the still shaking marshal. He swung him so he and Ford faced each other and were not two feet apart.

"Marshal," Jim ordered now, "arrest this man as a confederate of Red Mitchell. I'm pretty sure he was the hombre who hired Mitchell—or Malloy—to kill me."

"Sure he is!" chimed in Holliday. "I'll sw'ar to that, Jim!"

"Thanks, Mr. Holliday," said Jim, but did not take his attention from the men before him.

Burge stammered that he did not know what he

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was to do. It was incredible that he should arrest Lije Ford. Yet was it?

"Huh! You want me arrested!" Ford squeaked, and tried to squirm from the grip that held him. "What have I done? What have I done except to witness a killin' in cold blood?"

"You've done plenty, I reckon, Mr. Ford," Jim drawled. "I'll remind you of it later, but right now you're goin' to the jusgado if this town has one."

Despite his angry protests, Ford was marched towards the jail, and by Burge, who was beginning to get over his fright, since it looked as if he was not to be hurt himself. He was even experiencing a feeling of exultation. He had long known that Lije Ford should have been in jail.

"Shut up your damned belly-achin', Lije!" Nick commanded, and jabbed his prisoner hard with an elbow. "I'm takin' you to the calaboose. If you don't come along peaceable I'll drop you with my pistol and then drag you!"

Burge flipped his right hand downward. He was not disconcerted when he found an empty holster. This was the big moment of his life. Behind him the man he had mortally feared lay dead in the street.

"I'll have you know I'm the constabule of this here town, Lije Ford!" He gave his prisoner a jerk.

"And I'll have you killed for this!" Ford retorted. "I've been your friend through thick and thin, and now you've turned traitor to me! I'll have you killed for this if its the last thing I ever do!"

For once in his official career, Burge paid Ford no attention.

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CHAPTER VII

LIKE many persons of no great character, George McCracken was extremely sensitive, often masking this sensitiveness and his inferiority with anger. Now as he realised that two ordinary cowboys were ridiculing him, he flamed with rage. He started to climb from the buggy, but was blocked by Lanky.

"I am sorry to inform you, Mr. McCracken, that Miss Harlan told me to tell you she is not at home."

"Go to hell!" McCracken commanded. "Get out of my way!"

"Miss Harlan told me to inform you, sir——"

"Get out of my way, I tell you! I'll find out whether she's home or not!"

"Well, well, the gentleman seems to be riled," Windy declared without change of expression. "He don't seem to believe you, Lank."

"Well, he better not tell me so!" said Lanky.

McCracken caught the implied threat and dropped back to the buggy seat.

"What's the matter with you fools?"

"Nothin'," replied Windy.

"As obedient servants of Miss Harlan it is our duty to inform you she is nohow to home," added Lanky. "We want to spare you the trouble, sir."

"Or any possible humblin'," Windy put in.

Since he was madly in love with Nancy Harlan and could think of no reason why she should not love him, McCracken felt this insult keenly because he believed the girl had ordered the cowboys to attempt his humiliation.

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"What you mean by humblin'?" he growled.

"Just wanted to save you any trouble," said Windy. "You see it's a long walk from here to the house yonder. And a long way back. Beg pardon, but it might tire you some, sir."

This reminder of the fact that he had never done a year's hard work in the twenty-six of his life did nothing to lessen McCracken's rage.

"Well, I don't have to work!" he taunted childishly. "I got brains enough to get along without it!"

"Sure you have, sir," Windy agreed woodenly.

"You don't happen to have any spare brains, do you?" Lanky wanted to know. "Us poor ignorant cowpunchers'd sure like to borrer some."

"Go to hell!" George snarled, and found himself too indignant to trust further words. He debated with himself whether to jump from the rig, slash at his tormentors with the whip, or whirl and drive back to town. He suddenly remembered the revolver in his right hip pocket.

"I want to tell you two I don't appreciate this horseplay!" he told them with a voice that shook. "I won't stand for much more of it!"

"You seem to be settin' down anyway," muttered Lanky. "Say, pardner, he-says he don't 'preciate it."

"Reckon he ain't been used to bein' waited on by a butler and a footman," said Windy, and shook his head. "Well, that's 'cause he ain't never been in high sassiety."

"That's right. He does sorter look like common stock."

"Yeah. Damned common."

Then George exploded. He swished back the tail of his duster and grabbed the revolver, but as he whipped out the small weapon his wrist was grabbed

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by Lanky's right hand, and in a brief moment Lanky had the weapon. He glanced at it impassively and shoved it into a pocket of his overalls.

"If the gentleman ain't mad!" drawled Windy.

"Entirely unresponsible, cowboy."

From a window Nancy had been enjoying what she saw, until she caught the flash of metal and saw Lanky twist something from McCracken's hand. She decided then it was time for her to interfere. Though she was swayed between laughter and anger, she managed to look somewhat natural as she ran to the porch.

"Why, hello, George!" she called. "When did you get here?"

"You ain't!" Lanky announced to the girl as he bent from the hips.

"You sure ain't," added Windy, and made a similar bend. "You just ain't at home, Miss Nancy."

"That's what we was tellin' this here gentleman, but he didn't seem to believe us."

Nancy jumped to the ground, wanting to laugh, though she knew she must not.

"You fools," she cried, "what have you been doing?"

Lanky lifted a long arm and pointed to his partner.

"He's the footman, Miss."

Windy pointed now.

"Him, he's the butler."

Reinforced by the girl's presence and apparent sympathy, McCracken got the courage to leap from the buggy. He shoved Lanky aside.

"Get out of my way, you damned fool!"

Lanky stepped back, stiff and wooden, though he would have liked to roar with mirth.

"Thank you sir, thank you."

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Glowering as he strode towards the heads of the horses, McCracken whisked a tie-rope towards Windy.

"Get out of my way, you idiot! I never saw the time when I couldn't hitch my own team!"

Without changing expression, which just then was little more intelligent than that of a sheep, Windy stepped back. He bowed.

"Won't you let me hitch your broncs, sir?" he inquired, and winked at Lanky.

McCracken was too furious to retort. Lanky drawled:

"He has got brains enough to tie a hoss to a tree, Mr. Footman."

"Sure looks like he had," agreed Windy solemnly.

Though they both yearned for McCracken to show real fight so they might throw him into the buggy and turn him towards town, they did not know exactly why they were doing all this, and cared less.

McCracken almost tore off his duster, flung it to the buggy seat. He was turning indignantly towards the house when the lanky cowpuncher said:

"Pardon me sir, but here is your cannon."

McCracken turned in time to see him break the Smith and Wesson and drop the five cartridges into a pocket. He grabbed the now useless weapon and whirled, ramming the gun into a hip pocket.

"Windy! Lanky!" Nancy called. "You get back to work! And if I see any more such nonsense as this you'll hear from me! Go on now!"

They bowed stiffly to her and began to amble towards the bunk-house, losing their stiffness as they went.

"Wasn't he plumb riled through?" Windy demanded.

"Riled hell! He was plenty insulted and offended. Imagine him a pullin' that popgun on me!"

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"Yeah, just imagine it," Windy chuckled. "Why didn't you keep the thing, cowboy? We could've shot lizards with 'er."

The anger and humiliation had produced a strange and unlooked-for effect upon George McCracken. If he did not have actual courage now he had at least a determination to prove what a man he wanted to be.

Four times he had asked Nancy Harlan to marry him. She had given no definite answer, though twice she had laughed in a way that had made him angry and uncomfortable. Now he would bring matters to a showdown.

Though still pale and a little shaky, he confronted her sternly. He would prove right now that he was more of a man than she thought him.

"Did you put those two fools up to that horse-play, Nancy?" he demanded.

Her dark brows lifted and her eyes began to smoulder. "Did I put them up to it?"

"Yes! Did you order them to make a fool of me?"

She wanted very much to tell him she had no need to attempt to do what already was. Instead she smiled as if puzzled, and shook her head.

"I really didn't know anything about it. The last I saw of them they were breaking colts, George."

He braced back his shoulders, looked at her keenly. He tried to keep his hands steady as he lit a ready-made cigarette. She looked innocent, actually contrite.

"I'm glad you had nothing to do with it," he said with some magnanimity. "I can excuse such ignorance in a couple of brainless cowpunchers, Nancy."

"Of course you can," she agreed. "Don't think any more about it, George. You know it's as natural

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for cowboys to play pranks as it is for them to eat and sleep."

He grudgingly admitted this was so, but added: "I want this to be the last prank they play on me! I don't appreciate it."

"I know you don't," she acquiesced, wondering how she was going to get rid of him, and for good. "I'll have a talk with Lanky and Windy."

"Well, if they worked for me, under the same circumstances I'd fire them!" he declared. "I don't see why you keep such fools on the Bar H."

Her nearness and sweetness made it possible for him to forget the humiliation he had suffered. If she would promise to marry him it would not only give him courage and triumph, but also restore his full good opinion of himself. Because he was the son of the San Martin sheriff, who was rich, he felt no financial gulf between himself and this sweet, brown-eyed girl. "Come into the house, Nancy!" he ordered masterfully. "I want to have a talk with you."

She led the way, feeling as stiff as Windy and Lanky had looked. She tried to be impassive as she faced him in the living-room. His eyes roved about, came back to her.

"Is your mother home?"

"She drove up to Indian Spring with Dad."

He felt shaky, licked his lips. Still, he had to settle this question once and for all time.

"Nancy," he demanded, "are you going to marry me? I drove out this time to find out definitely."

"You did?" Her brows lifted, dropped, and she looked squarely at him.

"Yes, I did! I want to know now, Nancy." His masterful manner left him and he told her how passionately, how enduringly he loved her. He had loved her since he had been a boy and she a little

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girl. He felt he could not live without her. "Won't you marry me, Nancy?"

He tried to grasp her hands, sweep her into his arms, but she backed swiftly away, and lifted a warning hand.

"Wait! Not quite so pronto, George."

He was now trembling with a new confidence in himself because at last he had had the courage to demand that she marry him. A man had to be masterful with a woman if he wanted her respect and love.

Desperate, incoherent thoughts were whirling in Nancy's head. Should she do it? Something had to be done or those outlaws in Red Gash would break the Bar H and the Circle N. Should she make the sacrifice? Or would there be any risk? She tried to be calm and to think clearly.

"I must have your final answer now," George insisted, for he believed that at last she was weakening. "I have to tend to some important business, and I want to know before I go. You haven't any doubt that I love you and can take care of you?"

Though he paled, he managed to keep from looking aghast when she began to speak. She told him very calmly that she would marry him provided he would kill or drive the rustlers from Red Gash Valley and make the ranges safe for honest cattlemen.

"That's a big job," he declared. "The Red Gash gang is bad."

"But you are a big man, George," she encouraged, feeling desperate and frightened. "If anybody can do it you should be able to."

It was her sweetness, her unattainability heretofore, that made him say he thought he could do the risky job. He might have to call on the aid of his father, the sheriff, and a few deputies.

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"You don't expect me to do it all alone, do you, Nancy?"

"I'd rather you did it alone, George. But of course you may have to have some help. If you can do it alone it will prove you are the kind of man I would like you to be."

It took little encouragement to start McCracken to bragging. Now he had encouragement, and though he inwardly shook with terror at the prospect, he declared he would run the outlaws from Red Gash, though he might have to ask a man or two to help.

While she listened, Nancy, too, shook with terror at the thought of what she might actually be doing. Marry this bigoted, ugly man? Ugh! But he might run out the outlaws, and then she would be honour bound by her word. . .

Before he left she let him hold her close and kiss her, though she shuddered with the thought of what she would have to endure if she were actually to marry him.

For minutes after she had watched him drive confidently away she stood as if glued to the floor. Then she thought of the two cowboys outside. The fools, she would find them and give them a piece of her mind! Somehow they were responsible for what she had done.

But when she saw them working at one of the corrals she discovered she could not hurry towards them. She could not lecture them for their foolish horseplay without confessing she had promised to marry George M'Cracken provided he would rid Red Gash Valley and the San Martin Mountains of the rustlers. She dropped to a chair and took her face between her sun-browned hands.

"Oh, Good Lord, what have I done?" she whispered. "If he does what I asked—and he may!"

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CHAPTER VIII

THE trailing crowd separated into two sections as it neared the jail. One part consisted of partisans of Ford and the now dead gunman. There were nine men in this portion, three of them being Mexicans. They made a sullen, hard-looking lot, all having profited through the association with Ford and his dealings in stolen cattle. They talked earnestly for a few minutes and with a good deal of profanity and many angry looks towards the jail in which Ford had now been locked.

The jail was a one-room adobe with barred window and door. The swift turn of events had left the cattle-buyer so stunned that he did not fully realise what had occurred until he was staring through the bars. He demanded that he be liberated immediately. He could not be put in jail.

"I don't know so well about that, Lije," muttered the constable, who was beginning to doubt the wisdom of what he had done. "This feller here——"

"Whether you can be put in jail or not, it sure looks like you were there, Mr. Ford," Jim Barton drawled.

A few members of the gaping crowd laughed. Old Joe Holliday said with evident pleasure:

"Ye're right whar ye orter been for years, Ford, 'cept that ye orter been hung."

The imprisoned cattle-buyer snarled at old Joe and cursed.

"Sw'ar yer durned head off, Ford!" Holliday taunted. "Ye're whar it can't do ye much good."

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Burge was amazed and puzzled when he was ordered to hand over the large key to the door. He stammered that he was representative of the law here, and therefore custodian of the key.

"I'll take it," said Jim. "Somebody might decide to get it away from you."

"Durned if I wouldn't like to see somebody try to take it away from me!" Burge spluttered, but handed over the key.

"I'll act as one of your deputies while I'm here," said Jim.

"And ye kin rely on me fer another," put in old Joe. "Ford, shet up yer cussin'!"

The nine men who had been conferring apart from the remainder of the crowd approached now. They were led by a grisled fellow who seemed to have been chosen spokesman. Holliday had seen them start and had placed his back to the adobe wall. He laid the barrel of his rifle in the crook of his left arm. Seeing this significant action, Jim turned. He noted that six of the nine men had guns.

"Best stop there, men," he advised. "We don't want any more trouble if it can be avoided."

"Who the hell are you, ridin' in here and killin' a man and tellin' us what to do?" the grisled man demanded.

"Jim Barton."

"And I back Jim Barton's play to the last white chip!" put in old Joe. He was enjoying this immensely. He had long dreamed of seeing Ford just where he was, and it had been a long time since he had faced the prospect of a good fight in the cause of honesty and justice.

"You fellers come up here if you want to talk to me!" ordered Ford. "What you want, Hicks?"

Hicks, the grisled spokesman of the hard-bitten

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nine, said they did not like to see Ford in jail. He retorted that he did not like to be in jail.

Jim shifted his six-shooter along his waistband until it was in plain view. He let his right hand linger meaningly near the reddish stock of the forty-four.

"Mr. Ford will stay in jail till we are ready to let him out, hombres!" he warned. "But if you want trouble I reckon this is the right place to find it!"

"Durned tootin'!" agreed old Joe as his eyes glinted. "I got twelve kettridges in this here Winchester."

The majority of the nine had been witnesses to the swiftness with which Mex Malloy had ceased to be a gunman. Therefore they kept their hands well away from their guns. Ford, too, was not unimpressed by the deadly accuracy with which the young newcomer had ended the career of the killer. He was also realising that he was in jail and that from all appearances he was going to stay there. He profanely demanded to be told what charge was to be placed against him.

"Hell, thar ain't no use of makin' a charge again' ye, Ford!" taunted Joe. "Ye're so durned ornery ye orten't to be any place else except in jail."

Jim calmly told the imprisoned man he would probably be charged with conspiracy to murder. Ford protested his innocence, the injustice of his imprisonment. Holliday cackled mirthfully.

"Him innocent? Why, he wouldn't even steal another man's cow!"

Ford was too furious and frightened to trust himself to retort. The nine looked at old Joe and saw his ready rifle. They saw, too, the steady look in the blue eyes of the stranger. Burge felt that he was being overlooked and that he was being treated unfairly in

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having his pistol kept from him. He sidled to Jim and said:

"Like to have my Colt, mister. If there's any trouble——"

"If there's to be any more trouble you'll be better off without the Colt," Jim finished. "I'll see you get it back before I leave town."

"But damn it, I'm the marshal here! I got the legal right to tote a gun!"

"Shet up, Nick!" Holliday ordered. "Go ile yer voice. Fust thing ye know ye'll be crowin' like a banty rooster!"

"Go to hell, Holliday!" the marshal sputtered.

"Reckon I won't," announced old Joe. "Been thar long enough. This here town's hell herself. Now this young feller and me's goin' to reform 'er. Wanted to help out with the job fer a long time."

Ford was now shrilling for Hicks to come closer. The cowboy and the second-rate gunfighter looked inquiringly at Barton.

"Come on in and see what he wants," Jim said. "The rest of you hombres stay back."

Hicks advanced to the jail door.

"What you want, Lije? Us friends of yourn'll do anythin' for you."

Ford said that as long as he was in jail he wanted a message taken to Sheriff Barrett, advising that officer of what had unlawfully occurred here.

"Sure, go tell Barrett all about it, Hicks," Holliday encouraged. "Likely when he comes we'll put him in, too."

Jim was not as fiercely sanguine as was the old man. He did not want the sheriff to come and add complications, for he still planned to make his present stay here brief. He glanced at the sun. It was halfway to the western horizon.

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Hicks and one of the other Ford henchmen said they would take the news to the sheriff.

"Then do it!" Ford snarled. "And ride! I ain't goin' to stay here in this calaboose!"

Hicks and the other man, Kergan by name, were starting to get their horses when Ford summoned them back.

"Tell Barrett to bring a strong posse with him! Tell him Vernon's in the hands of lawless men!"

"Which it ain't," disputed Joe Holliday. "You mean it has been up till now, Ford."

The would-be messengers left now, and were followed by three of their henchmen. Jim advised the crowd to disperse. Presently only the four Ford sympathisers remained.

"You men go too," Jim ordered. "You aren't needed here."

They went reluctantly, and muttering. For the first time Elijah Ford felt the real seriousness of the situation, though he would not let his captors know his state of mind. He had been in other tight places.

"What you mean by keepin' me here, Barton?" he demanded indignantly.

Jim turned and gave him a long, sober stare.

"It's always best to keep a sidewinder where he can't do any harm, Ford. Don't get mad and bite yourself."

"He won't bite hisself, Jim," put in Holliday. "He's too durned big a coward. He hires men to do his dirty work."

In shrill and shaky voice Ford declared that things would be different when Sheriff Barrett and a posse arrived. Old Joe now turned to the barred door and glared balefully.

"And lemme tell ye, Ford, if I see Barrett and some more like him a-comin', I'm comin' back here and

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shoot ye! Ye done damage enough in this here kentry! No more of it ain't goin' to be stood!"

Jim had been wondering what would happen when the sheriff came. There must be nothing to conflict with his plans. He touched the old man on an arm. They walked a little distance and stopped. As they talked in low tones for a few minutes the old man's eyes brightened with savage pleasure.

"Yeah, I know of a place," he declared. "It's jest the right place, too!"

"Then go and make arrangements, Mr. Holliday. I'll stay round and see that nobody lets our sidewinder out."

"Gimme Nick's pistol, sonny. I used to be right handy with a six-shooter."

Jim handed over the marshal's weapon. The old man shoved it into his waistband and went towards the short main street, his eyes vigilant for trouble and a desire for further battle in his heart. With the rifle resting in the crook of his left arm he walked slowly as if daring any friend of Lije Ford to show himself.

Back at the edge of the village, among the grass and sage, Jim Barton walked round and round the little jail to make sure he was not surprised.

George McCracken drove towards Maguey with much-mixed emotions. He had forgotten the humiliation he had suffered at the hands of the two Bar H cowboys. He remembered the soft fragrance of Nancy Harlan's kiss, the warmth of her body as he had held her in his arms for a brief minute. It was wonderful to picture her as his wife. She was pretty, sweet. Her father was rich.

What made McCracken shudder was the knowledge that before he won this girl for his wife he must get

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the rustlers out of Red Gash Valley. He knew he lacked the courage to do this. Still it must be done.

"I've just got to!" he told himself, and tried not to picture Nancy as the wife of some other man. "I got to figure it out so I won't get hurt."

George shrank from bodily injury or the possibility of it. He racked his brain as he drove on. He realised that to personally account for the outlaws would make him a distinguished man. He pictured himself as riding into the rustler hangout with a six-shooter in each hand and either killing the gang or forcing it to leave the region.

"If the people here see me do that they'll wake up to what a man I am!" he muttered with brief comfort.

He had seen the outlaws from Red Gash when they had visited Maguey in twos and threes, and now it was not hard to visualise them as the hard, ruthless men they really were.

He had other thoughts that were disturbing. For some time he had suspected that his father, the sheriff, had some illicit connection with the Red Gash outfit. He did not know that Pat McCracken had got himself elected by grand promises that when once in office he would rid the entire region of its outlaws and thieves. After election the sheriff had done nothing to make good on those promises.

Frightening as was the thought of riding into Red Gash Valley, the thought of losing Nancy Harlan was worse. Something had to be done, and soon! George tried to think cunningly, sanely. He believed he could accomplish little without the aid of his father.

"If the old man'll help me—if he'll send out a big posse——"

George was not so stupid but he had heard mutterings of discontent over the way his father conducted

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his office. He believed, too, that Pat McCracken was making a lot of money, though the salary of sheriff was but three thousand dollars a year. His father had said he wanted the office for another four-year term.

"I wish I could find out how the old man's doing this," George muttered. "I'd make him dig up. With a good chunk of money I could get rid of those Red Gash hellions."

It was an encouraging thought that he could bribe or hire the Red Gash gang to leave the San Martin Mountains. It would be without risk, too. Still, was anything associated with Littrell and his desperadoes riskless?"

The farther he drove from the Bar H, the more frantic George became to possess the love and respect of Nancy Harlan. It was sickeningly disheartening, however, to recall how clear she had made her demands. If a posse went into Red Gash to offer battle to the outlaws, he, George McCracken must be an active member of that posse. A new thought took root in his brain.

"I wonder if she wants me killed off?" he cried almost aghast. "I wonder if that could be why she insists on me going to Red Gash?"

As he neared Maguey he turned to look at the rugged San Martins, now soft and beautiful through a blue haze. Back there in the cliff-locked retreat were eight men as desperate as any outlaws who ever stole cattle, and he, a lone man, had to get them out, or the girl he loved would not have him. It was an appalling task. George licked his lips. He prayed silently for some event that would make desperate action—if not entirely uncalled-for—at least a little less inevitable.

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CHAPTER IX

THE interest Hicks and Kergan took was because of fear that their easy if precarious existence in Vernon might be ended, rather than from any urge to get out of jail the man who had made that life possible. Both knew that Ford was really where he belonged, that he should stay there. But for their own selfish interests they did not want him to stay there. They also knew that if they were brought to an accounting they themselves should be in jail with Ford.

They rode hard, and it was only about eight in the evening when they arrived in Benton. Sheriff Barrett was talking with some men in front of a saloon. They beckoned to him. Barrett's face wore a puzzled look as he saw the dusty riders and the sweating horses. He was not pleased when he learned why they had come, for he had wished for some time that he might sever his unsavoury relations with Elijah Ford. Still, he had to be interested for two reasons. He was an officer of the law, and he owed Ford a considerable sum of money.

"And that ain't all!" declared Hicks after he had told of the cattle-buyer's incarceration. "This new hombre drills Mex Malloy square between the eyes!"

Barrett gasped. This was news! He had thought Malloy one of the deadliest and swiftest shots in all the South-west. He was not displeased, however, for he had believed that he would sooner or later be called to take the gunman into custody.

"Who is this shootin' fool, Hicks? A tall, blue-eyed jasper? Ride a roan horse?"

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"That's him, Sheriff! Lije sent us to tell you to come and get him out of jail."

"Sure, sure," Barrett agreed, though he wished he might leave Ford where he was. He knew all about Ford's illicit cattle business, as did practically all the ranchers on this side of the San Martins, and the pressure for him to put an end to it had been growing stronger week by week. He said he would ride over to Vernon and straighten things out.

"And Lije says to bring plenty of deputies with you!" declared Kergan. "Joe Holliday has thrown in with this newcomer."

Barrett frowned. He knew Holliday, and knew he was not a good man to fool with. Furthermore, he was square. If he had taken sides with the stranger it might well mean this stranger was not a deliberate killer or a fellow who would jail even Lije Ford without good reason.

"I'll rustle five or six good men," Barrett promised. "You hombres want to ride with me? If you do, be pronto about gettin' somethin' to eat and feedin' your horses."

Hicks and Kergan replied that they would be on hand when Barrett and his deputies were ready to leave.

Though it lacked but two hours of daylight when the sheriff and the seven other men trotted into Vernon's main street, lights shone and a few men were yet up. The cause of this unnatural excitement was soon communicated to Barrett and his posse. The little jail had been broken into. Lije Ford was gone, nobody knew where. Joe Holliday was gone, too, and the newcomer who called himself Jim Barton.

Barrett led the way to the jail. He was trailed by his seven men and many others. At the jail they found that the door had not been unlocked. The

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stout iron hasp had been prised out by the use of a steel bar or some similar tool.

"That's the way we found it, Sheriff," explained Simpson, the hotel man. "I come over about ten to talk with Lije, and found the door open and him gone."

Though he was grateful that Ford was missing and hoped he would never be found, Barrett knew he had to make at least a perfunctory investigation. It was peculiar that no horse tracks were found near the jail. The ground was so dry and hard that bootprints did not show, so there was apparently no way of telling in which direction Ford had been taken.

"Well, boys," the sheriff said after he had roamed about with a lantern for half an hour, "it sure looks to me like some of Lije's friends come to his aid."

The deputies who had come with Barrett joined in with this theory, but Hicks, Kergan and the residents of Vernon did not. It was incompatible with the disappearance of Jim Barton and old Joe Holliday.

"Yeah, I see your point, boys," Barrett told the dissenters, "but here's my point. If Lije was let out by some of his friends, ain't it likely this Barton decided he'd better hit the trail? And maybe old Holliday thought he'd better go along with him."

"That's right, Sheriff!" agreed Slim Hansen. "Old Joe's saddle hoss is gone. I looked in his barn."

"How about Barton's horse?" asked the sheriff.

Nobody seemed to know, so they all went to the feed-corral and roused John Bent. Bent was surprised when he found that Barton's roan was missing. He swore lustily.

"Damn that killer! He rides his hoss away and don't pay me for feedin' it!"

Grumbling about the way in which he had been cheated out of a dollar, Bent led the way back to the

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smelly shack where he lived. As he neared the doorway the light from his lantern revealed something small and white just over the threshold. He grabbed it up, found it was a silver dollar carefully wrapped in a piece of paper.

"Lemme see that, John!" the sheriff commanded brusquely. "It may be a clue."

The officer smoothed the paper, read:

"Sorry not to wake you, oldtimer, when I needed my horse. Hope the peso will foot the bill.
J. Barton."

"The horse-stealin' maverick!" Hicks swore. "He steals his own horse!"

"Which makes it all the plainer he had good reason for gettin' out of here between two suns!" growled Kergan.

Barrett asked whether Bent had heard any unusual sounds in the corral during the night.

"Nary a one, Sheriff."

"Then there's no knowin' what time this Barton took his horse, eh?"

"Nary way I kin see, Sheriff."

Because he knew that Mex Malloy had got nothing worse than he deserved, and Ford deserved little better, Barrett was willing to let the investigation rest where it was. If Ford had been liberated by his friends and was merely in temporary hiding, all right. If he never showed up in Vernon again that was all right, too.

"Guess I'll turn in if you have beds for me and my men, Simp," he told the hotel-keeper. "We're all plumb tired. I'll see what can be done in the mornin'."

To Hicks and Kergan here was tragedy as well as mystery. With Ford gone, they were out of jobs

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driving stolen cattle that the Red Gash outfit delivered here.

"Let's go talk to Frenchy about it," suggested Hicks.

Dawn was breaking when they reached an adobe at the westerly limit of the village. They roused Frenchy LaGuire, the owner of the adobe, a lean, swarthy fellow who was at least a quarter Indian. LaGuire had slept all night despite the excitement in town. He swore loudly when told what had occurred.

"Well, what you think about 'er?" demanded Kergan.

LaGuire said he could have no definite opinion until he learned whether Ford had been liberated by friends or enemies.

"Yeah, that's the hell of it!" Hicks agreed. "Say, look here, Frenchy, if that jasper, Barton, got hold of Ford, it don't look like none of the rest of us was safe, does it? We all been handlin' stole cattle, more or less."

"More," sneered LaGuire, who was becoming uneasy. "Course we only worked for Ford as cowpunchers though."

"And," Kergan put in, "Barrett ain't takin' no interest in the case a-tall."

"Yeah, I noticed he wasn't none too anxious to come," Hicks added.

LaGuire said it did not matter much to him what the sheriff did. He was concerned with Ford now, especially since Mex Malloy was dead there was a chance to get a job as Ford's bodyguard. Furthermore, with Ford gone, somebody should take the responsibility. LaGuire reasoned this responsibility belonged to him because he had acted as boss of the riders who had handled the stolen cattle.

It certainly would not do for the Red Gash men to

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come in with another drive at this time, at least until the excitement subsided.

"Well, one thing's got to be done, and pronto!" LaGuire swore. "Somebody's got to take the word to Littrell."

Hicks and Kergan declared they were too tired to go. They had ridden close to fifty miles already.

"Sure!" LaGuire snapped, much troubled. "I'll go! I want to get away from here before it gets good and light. You hombres saddle my horse while I dress and get some things ready."

Littrell's cold eyes did not waver in their penetrating steadiness as he waited for the field-glasses which were a piece of loot taken when part of the gang had held up a stage between Maguey and Mesa Grande.

"Some rider from the Bar H takin' a look at us," ventured Nashwilder. "He's got plenty sand!"

"Plenty no sense!" corrected Antrim. "He'll sure wish he'd never seen this place."

The outlaws had often planned how they would flank any man who appeared on the rim, and capture and kill him. Not one of them now but was thinking savagely of how this unlooked-for observer was to be annihilated.

"Here's the spy-glass, Jack," said Kirkup.

Littrell's handsome swarthy face was tense as he peered through the glass.

"Tall hombre on a good roan horse," he announced. "He's not so old, either."

The outlaw leader paid no heed as the other men begged for the glasses and a better look.

"Some Bar H rider, boss?" demanded Andrus.

"Or mebbe from the Circle N?" Ritter suggested.

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With the glasses still at his eyes, Littrell said he did not know. The lone watcher looked like a cowboy.

"He's wearin' a pistol and belt, and got a rifle under his stirrup," he added presently.

"Aw, I wish we had a cannon to kill the ——!" Antrim swore.

To the disappointment of the others, Littrell tucked the binoculars under his left arm. He looked steadily at the rider on the rim.

"We'll have to get that ——!" he declared suddenly. "He ain't up there for any good purpose."

He gave orders quickly and decisively. Three of the men were to saddle and ride up the valley to gain the rim and circle to west. He would take the remaining three and ride down the valley, then double back to the rim. They would cut off the lone rider no matter which way he fled.

They were starting for horses and guns when Ritter slid to a stop.

"Hey, Jack, look here!" he cried. "What you say we try the old buffalo-gun on him?"

Littrell pondered for only a moment. On their raids and cattle drives and when they rode about the mountains they usually carried Winchesters because of their light weight, but in the collection of arms inside the cabin was an old Sharps rifle that was twice as heavy as a forty-four Winchester, but had twice its range. "All right!" the leader snapped. "That ain't a bad idea. Old Buffalo may reach him."

"Hope he's near enough to the rim to roll over," Antrim chuckled savagely. "He'll sure have one long drop."

Littrell moved swiftly into the cabin, was out with the Sharps. He sat down on the ground and braced his back against the log wall, rested an elbow on a knee. As the report rang out it was amplified and dis-

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torted by the sheer wall against which it struck till it rumbled like thunder. Soon after their occupancy of Red Gash had begun the outlaws had discovered the strange acoustic qualities of the place, doubtless caused by the sheer walls and narrowed ends. They had learned that a single shot could produce a thunderous noise, and that a shot fired at one end of the valley could be plainly heard at the other end, three miles away.

Though the seven men outside the cabin were too far away for Jim Barton to know accurately what they were doing, he did see one go into the shack and come out with something in his hands. Jim was not left long in doubt as to what the man had brought from the cabin, for a few seconds later a bullet spanged against the very rim of the cliff. There came a rumbling report.

"Too low," Jim mused aloud, and smiled grimly, "but if he places the next one a little higher——"

Before the rifleman could reload and fire a second time, Jim had rammed the rowels into the sides of his horse and disappeared behind some pines and boulders.

Down at the cabin Littrell sprang to his feet.

"Get horses, men!" he snapped. "We got to get that ——, and find out why he's up there!"

But before a man could start to execute the order a thunderous rumble came down the valley. Every man tensed in his tracks. Kirkup lifted a hand with one finger up. He lifted another finger, then another as two more rumbles came.

"Three!" barked Littrell.

Then came three more quickly spaced shots, the sounds of which were like rolls of thunder.

"Wait, boys!" Littrell ordered. "We've got to see what that means!"

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CHAPTER X

THOUGH Jack Littrell's facial muscles were tight and his eyes impatient, it was not from fear, but from a delay in his plans. The three quick shots which after an interval were followed by a similar number were a signal no one could have known unless connected with the outfit.

"Some news from old Ford," declared Kirkup. "Likely he wants some more cows."

Littrell made no comment. His eyes went back to the rim from which the lone rider had disappeared. The other outlaws continued to speculate about what news the messenger was bringing.

"One thing's certain," Ritter laughed. "He ain't comin' with bad news."

"Unless it's for somebody else," chuckled Andrus. "Funny though, the jigger shows up there on the rim at the same time we hear the old signal."

"Damn the signal!" Littrell broke in. "Saddle them horses! It'll be ten or fifteen minutes before the man that fired those shots can get here. There he comes now. I want to be ready to ride after that hombre on the rim as soon as we see what the news is from Vernon."

The bullet from the Sharps rifle had rudely interrupted Jim Barton's survey of the outlaw stronghold, but as soon as he and the horse were hidden by trees and rocks he dismounted. By keeping low he managed to regain the rim without being seen. He lay flat, with some small boulders as a shield.

It was really a beautiful spot, this wide gash in the mountains. The ruddy cliffs reflected a pinkish light

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upon the lush grass. The meandering creek, bordered by cottonwoods, willows and occasional sycamores, added what Jim thought the final touch to perfect the grandeur of the scene.

From where he lay he could also see hazy blue range to southward, and knew it was the Harlan Valley, his destination. He now discovered the strategic value of the cliff-rimmed Red Gash. Besides being a perfect hangout for rustlers, it barred the ranchers of Harlan Valley from free access to the rich summer range of the San Martins. No wonder the ranchers of the lower valley wanted to be rid of the outlaws.

Jim saw a rider gallop from the gorge at the head of the outlaw valley, and was certain he was a messenger from Vernon. He chuckled with the thought of what news was being brought to the rustlers.

"It will surprise 'em some, likely. Maybe alter their plans, too."

He was more interested in what he saw in the middle of the valley. Horses were being roped and saddled, and men were entering and emerging from the cabin.

"I seem to have roused their curiosity," he decided as he continued to survey the picture below him. "This is going to be a hard place to get those devils out of if they don't want to go."

Within a few minutes seven saddled horses were in front of the cabin. Rifles and carbines were in saddle scabbards. Men weighted down with revolvers and filled cartridge-belts waited as the messenger came nearer.

"Damned if it ain't that Frenchy!" declared Nashwilder. "He must have news!"

"Frenchy all right," Kirkup agreed. "The way he's comin' sure makes it look like he was on business."

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"Hold your damned curiosity, men!" Littrell snarled. "What's the use guessin' about anything?"

The black-bearded Antrim gave the leader a sullen look and muttered a curse.

"Aw, we ain't doin' no damage by guessin'," said Ritter. "There ain't nobody to hear. That feller up there on the rim's too far away."

Littrell made no retort. His gaze was intent upon LaGuire. Frenchy was now coming at a stiff trot, and it was evident that he rode a tired horse. He lifted a hand as a symbol of peaceful intention. The seven outlaws spread fanwise in front of their horses, with Littrell in the middle. They saw now that LaGuire's swarthy face bore the marks of fatigue and anxiety. His sweat-caked mount came to a stop.

"Howdy, boys," he said, and smiled. "Glad I found you at home."

"Well, what's on your chest, Frenchy?" Littrell demanded. "What brings you here? Anything wrong?"

LaGuire dismounted and stamped his stiff legs.

"There's a lot wrong! That is I think there is."

Though the six outlaws grouped closer to the newcomer, Littrell did not move. His cold eyes became more intent than before, and did not leave LaGuire.

"Well, what's wrong? If anything is! Spill it!"

LaGuire, who was no master of brevity, began to tell why he had come. Littrell lifted a hand.

"Leave off the frills, Frenchy. Tell it in as few words as you know how!"

Dominated by the cold steel of the leader's eyes, LaGuire told briefly what had caused him to come to Red Gash. Littrell's face tightened a trifle.

"Hell! Old Ford in jail!" Ritter ejaculated. "Who'd a-thought it?"

"He was in jail," LaGuire corrected.

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"And Mex Malloy dead!" drawled Andrus.

Draper and Kirkup began to complain that likely no more stolen cattle could be sold in Vernon. Littrell ordered them to be silent.

"Who raised all this hell, Frenchy?"

"Feller as calls himself Jim Barton. He shows up in town yesterday and sort of throws in with old Joe Holliday."

"That old ——! I always said he orter be killed!" snarled Kirkup. "Never did like the way he looked at us when we rode into Vernon."

Again Littrell commanded silence.

"What's your idea of this, Frenchy? Did Ford get out through the aid of his friends, or not?"

LaGuire grimaced and shook his head.

"Damned if I know, Jack. I'm a-tellin' you what happened, not how and why."

"But this son of a gun drillin' Mex Malloy between the eyes!" Ritter marvelled. "Malloy was a plenty good man with a six-shooter!"

"There was never a man so good with a gun but what a better one turned up sooner or later," Antrim growled, and cast a sullen look towards Littrell.

The leader now told Frenchy of the man who had appeared on the westerly rim. LaGuire paled as he looked in that direction. The rim was bare of life. Against the far blue two eagles soared, occasionally screaming.

"That's him!" Frenchy cried. "I'll bet my chaps——"

"That's who?" Littrell demanded.

"Why, the hombre that started all this hell! It's that man, Barton! I follered a fresh hoss track all the way from Juniper Meadows. It turned west yonder beyond the head of the gorge."

This statement left little doubt in the minds of the

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rustlers that the horse that had made those tracks was the horse of an enemy. Littrell awoke to savage action. He ordered Kirkup, Nashwilder and Ritter to ride hard up the valley and gain the rim. The men hesitated at their horses.

"But where's old Ford?" Nashwilder demanded.

"Never mind Ford!" Littrell barked. "You know how to get around that —— up there! Do it! I'll take the rest of the boys and go the other way."

Nashwilder, Ritter and Kirkup rode away. LaGuire began to tell more fact and surmise. The leader checked him with an angry oath.

"I'll listen to the rest of it when we get back, Frenchy. You best stay here and rest. We got to get that feller there on the rim."

When angry or impatient, the outlaw leader allowed his voice to grow loud and shrill. This, coupled with the peculiar acoustic properties of the valley, made it possible for Jim Barton to catch an occasional word despite the distance. What he thought immediately was substantiated when he saw four riders start down the valley at a run. He had watched three ride in the other direction.

"I reckon this looks like a good place for me to get out of," he muttered, and began to make his way back to where he had left the roan horse. There was no doubt at all in his mind as to the outlaws' intentions. The bullet from the Sharps rifle was ample proof that he had been seen.

"I was a fool! I should have left my bronc back there out of sight. Well, it's done now."

Ritter, Kirkup and Nashwilder had to draw down to a walk when they came to the mouth of the gorge up which the trail wound. The hooves of their horses rang on the rocks.

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"What you reckon become of Ford?" Ritter asked. "If he's gone for keeps, it settles our hash as far as gittin' rid of cows is concerned, don't it?"

"Sure looks that away," Kirkup nodded.

"And that old Holliday hombre," Nashwilder muttered, "he ain't such good medicine. Last time I was in Vernon, Mex Malloy told me Holliday hated Ford like pizen. If the old man had anything to do with bustin' that jail and takin' Ford out, he'll take him off in the hills somewhere and kill him sure as hell!"

"Well, if he does," Ritter chuckled, "it'll settle Ford's hash for keeps."

"Yeah, and our chances for disposin' of any more cows in that direction," Nashwilder grumbled.

The trail narrowed and they clattered on in single file, each animated by the thought of gaining the rim and taking up the hunt for the man they had seen there. Kirkup, who was in the lead, called back:

"If sellin' rustled cows is settled, it won't keep us from stealin' that Harlan gal, boys!"

"By hell, it won't!" Ritter agreed. "There's more dinero in one gal than in a thousand cattle anyhow."

"We gotta talk to the boss about gettin' that gal," called Nashwilder. "It may be just the right chance to make big dinero."

The horses were soon scrambling up a zigzag trail and further talk was almost impossible. They were half-way up, and Kirkup's horse loomed perilously over those of the others when he looked down and called grimly:

"We gotta do what we're out to do first! After we get that feller up there we'll talk kidnappin' to the boss!"

"The boss'll take to the idea," Ritter answered as

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he looked up. "Say, don't let that bronc topple on me, Kirk."

At the lower end of the valley a tremendous mass of cliff had tumbled from the rim at the right in some remote time, making a huge pile of boulders, slabs and rubble and forcing the creek to the east in an abrupt curve. Littrell led his three men round the edge of this huge pile and gained the better going of the stream bank. A voice rang mysteriously down from an overhanging crag. The four outlaws reined up. Looking up, they saw Chico, the Mexican look-out, standing perilously three hundred feet above them. Littrell hurriedly shouted a brief explanation, then rammed spurs into the sides of his horse.

"If we don't get that —— there on the rim," he called back as he twisted lithely in the saddle, "our game is up! He's headin' for the ranches in Harlan Valley!"

Because Andrus, Draper and Antrim understood and agreed, they saw the desperate necessity of getting the man who had been seen spying on their rendez-vous. They had to ride hard for half a mile before they came to the foot of a rocky trail that led upward at their right. Littrell led the way. He spurred on, but turned recklessly to look back.

"If we can get there in time to corner him against Black Rim, we got him sure!" he cried. "Don't spare your horses!"

On the pine-studded, boulder-strewn mesa, with a timbered peak looming miles to northward, Jim Barton realised the value of time, and swore because he had been so careless as to allow himself to be discovered by the outlaws. As soon as he had regained his saddle he had decided his best chance for a safe

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getaway was to ride as directly westward as possible for a few miles before he turned towards Harlan Valley.

He kept his horse at a trot where he could, and had covered a mile or more when he found he was on the edge of a slope that broke off gently though it was gutted with ravines and dotted with boulders. At the foot of the slope was a narrow sage valley that apparently ended in a canyon whose head was well towards the timbered peak.

To southward the valley flared out two or three miles away and seemed to become part of a lower tableland. At the westerly side of the narrow valley a sheer blackish wall lifted. This wall seemed to be cut by but one gash that might be negotiable by horse and rider.

One look told Jim this wall might be the making of a trap. He had to decide quickly whether to swing back and try to regain the timber of the peak, or head towards Harlan Valley. He had started for Harlan Valley, and was stubbornly reluctant to double back on the trail, even for a part of the way.

He headed down a rocky ridge to gain the level below so he might put the roan to best speed. Despite the perilous going he trotted the animal most of the way. Occasionally he surveyed the blackish wall ahead.

"Mighty steep," he muttered. "Well, if I can get out of here——"

He reached the comparative level and was ready to rein to the left and use the spurs when his ears caught a faint noise like the distant ringing of a shod hoof on rock. He swung in his saddle and saw three riders limned against the sky and the pines at the broken rim less than a mile away.

"The three that high-tailed it up the valley!" he

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told himself grimly. "Now about the four that headed down—— If I can beat them out of this trap——"

As he swung on the reins and rammed in the rowels he saw the three riders start down the rocky slope at a perilous pace, but felt no fear of them. His one problem seemed to be to get well out of the narrow valley before the other four could cross the lower mesa and cut off his escape.

He had ridden hard for perhaps two miles and was beginning to breathe more easily despite the hard going when ahead and to his left, not half a mile away, a rider suddenly appeared on the rim that flattened above the top of a long, gentle slope. Another rider showed himself, then a third and a fourth. After a few seconds of hesitation they spurred down the slope. Jim Barton hauled his blowing horse to a stop and looked towards the blackish wall at his right. He knew he was trapped unless he could climb through the broken gash that cut the wall.

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CHAPTER XI

It was the middle of the afternoon when Tom Harlan stopped his team at the Bar H. His wife was beside him on the buckboard seat. Lanky Higgins and Windy Irwin had just driven in with a span of four-year-old draft horses hitched to a heavy wagon.

"How are they goin' to break, boys?" the rancher inquired.

"Fair to middlin'," said Lanky.

"They'll be broke after a while," Windy added.

Mrs. Harlan looked at the young cowboys in some perplexity. They seemed entirely too innocent. The rancher was also noting the same cherubic expressions on the tanned visages of his riders.

"What you boys been up to?" he demanded.

"Aw, nothin'," answered the usually loquacious Windy.

"Just bustin' colts all day," drawled his partner. "Purty tired, too."

Harlan unhitched his team while the cowboys performed like work on the fractious four-year-olds. Meantime Mrs. Harlan watched Lanky and Windy, and noticed that they did not look at her. This was not like them. She wondered if they had got hold of a bottle somehow. She took a few steps and resolutely shook Lanky's shoulder, turned him round.

"What have you boys been up to?" she demanded.

"Aw, nothin', ma'am."

"Just breakin' colts," added Windy. "It's made us turrible tired, Miz Harlan."

"Not too tired to do a lot of grinning and laughing to yourselves."

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"Aw, we had a visitor, ma'am!" Lanky confessed.

"Yeah, we had a visitor."

"Well, who?" she demanded.

They told her George McCracken had been here. She frowned and looked about, for she did not like or trust young McCracken.

"Huh? What's that?" Harlan demanded. "Who'd you say'd been here?"

"George, the famous son of our famous sheriff," grinned Windy.

Harlan turned his horses towards the barn and approached the grinning cowboys sternly. He did not like George either.

"What'd you two do to the worthless cayuse?" he wanted to know. "Did you tie a can to him? Wish you had!"

"Naw," Lanky grinned, "we buttled him."

"Yeah, and footmanned him, too," put in Windy.

"You what?"

With many words and much pantomime they told how they had received young McCracken.

"He was that ignorant he didn't nohow appreciate the whole business," Lanky explained with a long face. "It sorter made him mad, too."

"No wonder!" cried Mrs. Harlan as she suppressed a laugh.

Not so with her husband. He laughed so heartily that he had to slap his thigh to express his feelings.

"By golly, I wish I'd been here! I'd like to seen how that worthless cuss acted! Which one of you was footman?"

"Windy acted as such," grinned Lanky. "He done purty good for a raw hand, at that."

"Reckon I done as good as you done at buttlin'," protested Windy. "Yeah, better. You done so durned poor, George he up and tried to shoot you."

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"What?" Mrs. Harlan cried. "Why, George McCracken didn't try to do that, did he?"

Lanky explained, adding:

"All he had was a silver-mounted popgun. I took it away from him, ma'am."

"Where was Nancy all this time?"

"Aw, she was here," laughed Windy.

"She finally sorter took pity on poor little Georgie," said Lanky.

"Yeah," elaborated the grinning Windy, "she comes out and asks him into the house, and—well, sorter——"

"Sorter scolds us some," replied Lank. "But she didn't sound so very serious about it."

Mrs. Harlan was thinking it strange and disquieting that George McCracken should have come while Nancy was alone here, alone except for the two cowboys. It was all right for her to be here with them, but as for McCracken . . . In Maguey George did not have much more reputation for morals than he had for hard work.

"How long was he here, boys?"

"Aw, half a hour or so, ma'am," Windy said. "He wouldn't nohow look at us when he left."

"And we'd put ourselves out to welcome him so polite, too."

"You should have gone to the house and stayed there till he left!" growled Harlan.

The cowboys grinned at each other.

"We had a notion to do just that," Windy confessed, "but when she comes outdoors, Nancy orders us to hunt a job pronto."

When Mrs. Harlan reached the house she found Nancy looking as if she might have been crying. In fact the girl had been wondering with alternating horror and hope, what might be the consequences of

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what she had done. She still loathed herself because she had let George hold her in his arms.

"Nancy, did you somehow send word to George that your father and I would be away from home to-day?" Mrs. Harlan demanded half-doubtfully.

The girl's eyes widened with hurt and anger. She rose from her chair.

"Mother! You know I wouldn't do a thing like that! I hate the ground George McCracken walks on! He's just a swelled-headed pup because his father is the sheriff!"

In swift, tremulous words she confessed what she had done. Her mother was aghast, incredulous.

"Nancy! You promised to marry him? Oh, I would rather have you marry an Apache Injun!"

The girl tried to smile.

"I told him I would marry him if he would run the rustlers out of Red Gash Valley, Mother. That's all I told him."

"But why did you do that?"

"Well," the girl shrugged listlessly, "I wanted to help. Somebody has got to get rid of those rustlers, or we won't have any cows left. I—I guess I thought that if he had the nerve to try the job he might get killed."

"Then you don't want to marry him, Nancy?"

"Oh, Mother, of course I don't! But I did want to do something about that Red Gash gang. They've stolen thousands of head of cattle from us."

Mrs. Harlan studied her daughter.

"I wish you had told us you felt this way, dear; that you were this desperate about the rustlers."

Nancy confessed she had not become desperate until she had seen George coming again. She smiled now.

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"And the way Windy and Lank made a fool of him," she said. "I guess it made me a little sorry for him. Let me tell you what those two fools did!"

"Windy and Lanky told us what they did," said Mrs. Harlan. "I don't blame them. And Lanky told us George tried to shoot him, too."

Nancy nodded.

"Yes, I saw George pull a gun. Lanky took it away from him. I guess that was what made me sorry for George. He was really so helpless. But there's no harm done, Mother. There isn't one chance in a million that George McCracken will get within ten miles of those outlaws."

"Just the same, I wish you hadn't done this foolish thing."

Nancy admitted she had probably done wrong, but repeated there was very little chance of George even trying to run out the rustlers.

"Likely not," Mrs. Harlan said, "but will you marry him if he does?"

The girl flinched, paled. She tried to laugh.

"I'll have to. I promised I would if——"

"Well, you won't!" her mother interrupted sternly. "I'll have something to say about that, and so will your father. Now I'll tell you why I wish you hadn't done this silly thing. Your father is bringing in a man to attend to those Red Gash outlaws."

Nancy stared in surprise.

"He is? He's bringing in a man to run the rustlers out of Red Gash, Mother?"

Mrs. Harlan qualified her statement by adding that Harlan was not doing this alone. He was acting with John Nesbit of the Circle N, who had suffered as heavy losses as had the Bar H.

"That's what we have been doing to-day, Nancy. We went to Injun Springs to meet John Nesbit."

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"But why on earth didn't you tell me?" Nancy demanded.

Mrs. Harlan said she had not known it herself until after they had left the ranch.

"Your father just asked me to ride over with him. We were a mile away from here before he told me what we were making the trip for."

Nancy sat down limply. This was a surprise and one out of which she caught a little hope. If a real man were coming to tackle the job of cleaning the region of cattle thieves——

"Who is he, Mother?" she begged. "Is he some range detective?"

"I don't really know, Nancy, except that he's the son of a man John Nesbit used to know. Yes, and he has been a Texas ranger. John told us that."

Nancy uttered a silent but very devout little prayer of gratitude. If some former Texas ranger were coming, then she would not have to worry about her rash and silly promise to George McCracken. She all but forgot George as she tried to picture the former Texas ranger, who even now must be on his way to Harlan Valley.

"But what is his name, mother? You must know that at least."

Mrs. Harlan frowned, said she was poor at remembering names of people she had not met. Yes, Nesbit had told them his name.

"It's Barton, Jim Barton," said Harlan, who, unnoticed, had taken a stand in the doorway.

Nancy stared in bewilderment at her father, for he was bending stiffly at the hips while he looked as sober as a wooden Indian.

"If you will pardon me, miss," he said formally, "I'll soon have the pleasure of lettin' you take a look at this here ex-Texas ranger that's comin' to take

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charge of this rustler-chasin'. He ought to be here any day now, miss."

After she had laughed happily for the first time in several hours, she ran to her father and flung her arms about his neck.

"Say, look out there, miss," he protested in mock sternness. "That's no way to treat the footman and butler. Windy and Lank have just been showin' me how they received George."

Laughter and tears were in the girl's eyes as she backed away to look at him.

"You don't blame me for what I promised that fool, do you, Dad?" she begged.

He drew her into his arms and lifted her face.

"Sure, I don't blame you for anything, honey. But this ranger who is comin'——

"Yes, what about him, Dad?"

Harlan explained that he and Nesbit had agreed nothing was to be said about Barton or what he was to do, not even to the riders on either of the ranches.

"We'll make out as if we took him on here as a tophand, Nancy. It'll give him a chance to get the lay of the land."

"How old is he, Dad?"

Harlan screwed up his weathered countenance, shook his head.

"Lemme see. I don't remember whether John said he was sixty or sixty-one." He looked at his wife. "Mary, how old did John say this comin' ranger feller was?"

Mrs. Harlan could smile now, for her usual confidence in her pretty daughter had returned. If Nancy could so quickly become interested in a former Texas ranger she had never seen, she certainly was not in love with the worthless, stupid George McCracken.

"I think," she said as she tried to remember

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whether Nesbit had said anything about Barton's age, "that he said about thirty or thereabouts, Tom."

Harlan shook his head as if unconvinced.

"Well, maybe," he admitted, "but I got the idea he was up in the fifties or sixties, Mary. Don't see that it matters, though, as long as he cleans up that Red Gash outfit. I always like an older hand for a tough job like that."

Nancy began to ask more questions about the ranger and the reasons for his coming.

"It's this a-way," her father explained. "Our two outfits together could likely clean up on that Red Gash gang, but it'd mean that likely some of our men'd get killed or hurt. So John and I talked this over and decided he'd best write his old friend down in Texas. He did, and this Barton is comin', and all we know about him is that he used to be a ranger back there."

Presently Nancy went out and stood in the shadow of the cottonwoods at the northerly side of the house. Her spirit was light because it looked at last as if the ranges were to be rid of cattle thieves, lighter because of romantic thoughts that had come to her.

She would have trembled with fear and horror, however, had she been able to see this very minute how the man about whom she thought was trapped against a black wall by the very outlaws he had come to take.

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CHAPTER XII

EVEN as his brain pictured glorious deeds, George McCracken was not able to shake off the knowledge of his own lack of courage. This did not dim the ardour of his love, however. It was not unselfish love, for much of his eagerness to marry her was caused by the fear that if he did not some other and more worthy man would.

He was still appalled by the magnitude of the task she had set for him, and as he arrived in Maguey he felt that he was unable to cope with it alone.

"Damn it, if I could get somebody to do it for me, and make her believe I did," he mused. He believed, however, that she would not be easy to deceive.

He must have help, and the logical person to give this help was his own father.

"The old man's just got to help me out! It'll be about as much to his interest as it will to mine if I marry into the Harlan family."

Sheriff McCracken was a big man, muscular and ruddy. When elected, he had been filled with heroic determination and ambition to rid the country of lawlessness, but soon after he had taken office he had made two discoveries in himself.

The first was that talking grandly about what he was going to do to desperadoes was one thing, and doing it quite another. The second was that it was profitable to overlook much the outlaws did. He was not greatly disturbed by the rising indignation of the men who had elected him, because, secure in the office for another three years, he felt he could have ample

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money when his term was ended. He smiled now as his flashily dressed son came into the office.

"Hello, George."

"'Lo."

"Where you been?"

The younger man said he had been out to the Bar H. The sheriff smiled under his large, ruddy moustache.

"Courtin', eh?"

Because he knew certain things, George had no great respect for his father, worthless as he himself was. Furthermore, he might fear other men, but this blustering, genial sheriff he knew too well.

"I went out to see Nancy," he confessed sourly, wondering where to begin.

McCracken's blue eyes twinkled.

"Any luck, George?"

George sat down and lit a cigarette.

"I'd had plenty luck if you'd done what you ought to!" he accused angrily.

The sheriff paled.

"You might tell me what you mean by that! I don't see where I have anything to do with your courtin'."

George now angrily told his father what Nancy Harlan had told him. The sheriff laughed, but not too comfortably. At election he had had the support of Tom Harlan and all his cowboys. Now he knew he did not have it.

"So she told you she'd marry you if you run all the rustlers out of Red Gash, eh?"

"You heard me!" George sneered. "And if you'd done this like you ought to, I wouldn't be put in such a hell of a position!"

The sheriff scrambled up, rammed his hands into his pockets. He glared.

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"Don't you talk to me this way!" he ordered. "Why, you low-down pup, I know what I'm doin'!"

Desperation and the fear that he would not get Nancy gave the son courage he would normally have lacked.

"Bet your life you know what you're doing!" he sneered. "What's more, I know it, too!"

"You might tell me what it is, if you know so damned much, George!"

"Sure, I'll tell you! You leave the Red Gash outfit alone because they split with you! And you know it!"

The sheriff reddened with rage now. He stormily declared that what George had said was not true. There was not a word of truth in it. He towered over his insolent son, but George had the bravery of the coward who realises he has at least an even break. George angrily flung the stub of his cigarette towards the big office safe.

"I dare you to open that and show me what you've got in it!" he challenged.

"There's no reason why I should open it for you," retorted his father.

"There's a lot more in it than you've ever earned out of your pay!" accused George sarcastically. "I dare you to open it and show me there ain't!"

McCracken now began to wonder how much this son of his did know, and how loose his tongue might be.

"I've made a few good investments," he explained.

George laughed derisively.

"Yeah, in Red Gash outlaws! Sure, they pay you plenty for lettin' 'em alone."

George had decided his best bet was to try to goad his father into sending a posse to exterminate the Red Gash outlaws. Of course he would ride along with

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the posse. He would have to do that at least. Nancy would think him a hero.

"Look here, George," the sheriff demanded with hurt in his voice, "who gives you spendin' money? Who makes it possible for you to live well and easy when you ought to be out at work? Tell me that!"

George smiled and shrugged insolently.

"You do, but it don't cost you anything. You get the dinero plenty easy, and I don't see why I shouldn't spend some of it."

"George, you're accusin' me wrongly!"

"Oh, no, I ain't. I'm on to your game. I been on to it for a good while, too."

McCracken turned to stare out the window. He suddenly felt as if he were trapped. He must have time. If George talked—and the weak-willed fool might talk—the county commissioners might do a little investigating.

McCracken had heard rumours already. If these rumours were true, some of the ranchers, particularly Harlan and Nesbit, were becoming impatient over the dearth of action from the sheriff's office. The "grapevine" reports had been to the effect that if the sheriff did not take action soon against the rustlers, the ranchers would.

George, feeling triumphant now, was beginning to believe he possessed a good deal of courage and sagacity. He glanced towards the big, insecure safe, in which he believed there was a lot of money belonging to his father. Then his gaze returned to his father's broad back.

"Gettin' under the old man's hide," he told himself. "He's got to do it."

The sheriff turned suddenly, for he had reached a decision. After getting two or three more fat cuts from Littrell and his gang he would take a big posse

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and run out the rustlers. That would be easy and heroic work, and would likely change the opinion of the ranchers so they would re-elect Pat McCracken as sheriff of San Martin County.

"George," he said with fatherly concern, "I'd sure like to see you marry Nancy Harlan."

There was comfort in the thought that if George and Nancy were married Tom Harlan might be more friendly towards the administration of the present sheriff.

"Well, I intend to marry her!" George cried, all his weak character suddenly showing in his face.

"Don't blame you, don't blame you, boy," agreed his father. "Nancy's a nice girl and she's pretty, too. About the sweetest girl in the county, I reckon."

This reminder made the young man newly conscious of Nancy's beauty and sweetness, and served to fan his eagerness to have her for his wife.

"You're damned right she's pretty and sweet!" he declared. "That's why I want her! Besides, she's dead right when she says it's your duty to get rid of the Red Gash gang!"

McCracken knew it was his duty, as well as he knew he did not want to do it. A few more fat contributions from the Littrell gang, and he would have quite a fortune. Furthermore, every head of stock rustled from Tom Harlan made the rancher that much poorer and weaker. The sheriff had long harboured a plan by which he could see Harlan weakened to the extent that he would have to sell out. When this happened, he, Pat McCracken, meant to have enough money to buy the Bar H and go to ranching.

He moved a chair close to the one George occupied, and sat down. He looked at his son with fatherly concern.

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"George, when do you have to make good on that promise to Nancy?"

George said no specific date had been mentioned, but he had assured Nancy it would be done immediately. He was now feeling much more encouraged. If the old man and a big posse would undertake this dangerous job he would not stand much chance of getting hurt himself. Of course he would kill an outlaw or two if this could be done without risk.

McCracken frowned as if disappointed. He was certainly disturbed.

"I'll tell you this, George," he said, "though I hadn't meant to tell anybody just now. I'm workin' on plans to get rid of Littrell and those rustlers of his."

George demanded to be told what these plans were, when they were going to be executed. He bravely declared he was going with any posse that entered Red Gash Valley.

"Sure, you'll have the chance to ride along," his father agreed.

George began to hope that something would intervene to render the raid unnecessary until he recalled that his taking part in it had been Nancy's main stipulation. He inwardly shrank with horror. It would be hell to find himself in Red Gash facing the deadly gun of Jack Littrell or that of black-bearded Antrim. He had seen both these men, and right here in Maguey. Secretly he did not blame his father for avoiding trouble with the outlaw gang.

"Well," the sheriff frowned and hesitated, "this thing of wantin' it done right off will upset my plans. You see I want to make sure we don't get any men killed or shot up, George. It's goin' to be a dangerous job. I don't want to fool you about that."

"Damned right it's goin' to be dangerous!" George

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blurted, and felt as if just riding into Red Gulch would be like a nightmare. "But—but if there's a posse I'm going with it."

George's sinking spirit was partly balanced by his frenzied determination to win Nancy Harlan as his father began to explain that it would require two weeks, possibly longer, for him to perfect his plan of campaign. What McCracken really wanted to do was to get news to Littrell that he must have a large sum of money immediately if the Red Gash outfit was to continue to enjoy official protection. With conditions as disquieting as they were, it would be advisable to get a lump sum of money immediately. After this was secured, a posse could ride into Red Gash and put an end to the outlaw gang. McCracken was also shrewdly planning that he would not need to lead the posse, though of course he would ride along and take the principal honours. He had an under-sheriff who, though easy-going, was only awaiting orders to proceed against the outlaws.

"I don't know how long Nancy'll wait," George stammered. "She said I had to do it as quick as I could."

"Of course she'll wait!" the sheriff encouraged. "What's a month? This here's a big job, and it can't be done successful in a day unless we want to get our men killed or shot up. Here's my idea. Next time you see the girl, tell her you've got to have a little time to get the right sort of posse together. It won't be hard for you to make her believe that's right if she loves you, boy."

"But the hell of it," George protested, "is that she won't love me unless I get rid of that Red Gash outfit!"

McCracken cunningly said he doubted this. Women were strange creatures. George would realise this

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when he was older. He chuckled and patted his son's leg again.

"What she wants most of all, George, is for you to prove yourself a hero. It beats all hell how a girl'll love a feller if she thinks he's a hero. 'Course she loves you now. If she didn't, she wouldn't have promised to marry you if you run Littrell and his men out of the San Martins. You can bet your bottom dollar on that."

For a few moments George felt much better. Was it possible that Nancy had stipulated he run the outlaws out of the San Martins just to prove how much of a man he was? Shrewdly refraining from revealing what he was really planning, the sheriff was beginning to explain the intricacies of a girl's mind when Buck Layton, the under-sheriff, came in.

Buck was long and lean and had a much-wrinkled face adorned by a drooping sandy moustache. His squinted blue eyes held a humorous twinkle as they beheld the young man.

"Howdy, Georgie," he drawled. "You're sure lookin' fine. Dressed up like you'd either been out among 'em, or was goin'."

George stammered a reply, and reddened. He hated Buck Layton, because in him he saw a man of more honesty and courage than he himself possessed.

After his droll inquiry Buck ignored young McCracken and began to talk to the sheriff about a drunken Mexican sheepherder who seemed to show symptoms of insanity.

George rose nonchalantly and sidled to the big iron safe. As he leaned against it, apparently listening to what Layton said, he rolled and lit a cigarette. Then as he puffed, his right hand slid back and found the knob of the combination dial. His ears were alert as he slowly turned it. If he could open the safe he

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might get the Red Gash outfit to leave the San Martins, and without risk to his life. It was not an entirely new hope, but at least it was one worth serious consideration, especially since his father had said it might take a month before he gathered a posse and tackled the dangerous job.

CHAPTER XIII

JIM BARTON was angry and chagrined when he realised his situation. He knew he had ridden into the cul-de-sac because he had had no accurate knowledge of the terrain. He saw now where he could have slanted across the mesa and probably gained a good lead over the four men who had ridden down the rock-walled valley.

He knew he had little time to consider, for the riders were now closing in from two directions. He looked at the rough slope down which he had just come. He might climb it, gain the rough mesa and outrun the men who were after him. But no, either a rider or a bullet would overtake him, probably a bullet. For a few moments he thought of trying to run the gauntlet of the four riders who were well down the slope to southward.

"Not one chance in a million," he told himself grimly.

Towards the canyon to northward there seemed to be as little chance of escape, for three riders were fast approaching from that direction. The only possible chance was the break in the black wall. If it could be climbed he might get away. He turned and spurred

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towards it. Immediately his pursuers began yelling, then shooting at long range.

Jim gave all his attention to gaining the ragged break in the wall before the seven rifles could get within comparatively good range. He could make a stand if he found he could not climb the wall.

He saw that the flaring sides of the cleft were some fifty yards apart as he neared it with his horse at a breakneck run. Then his heart momentarily sank. The cleft was a jumble of great boulders and brush. It was steep and its side walls precipitous. At its upper end a hundred-foot cliff lifted sheer and smooth.

It was a retreat into which a mountain goat could climb, but never a horse. Jim felt as if he must leave a very old dear friend as he laid his hand on the neck of the roan.

"Sorry, boy," he muttered with huskiness in his voice, "but here's where you and I have to part, maybe for keeps."

He rode into the cleft until the horse could go no farther, then dismounted. He took his coat from the back of the cantle, for it had some letters and tobacco in it. He drew the carbine from the saddle scabbard, then after another pat on the animal's neck, made for the nearest boulder.

Bullets spattered on the big rock as he dived behind it. He heard an ominous whirr, and flung a big rattlesnake away with the barrel of his carbine.

"This," he muttered coolly, "is goin' to be a rattlers' den and a hornets' nest combined."

He had little time for rattlers, however, for bullets continued to spang against the rock and to whine harmlessly away. Jim peered over. Three men were in sight two hundred yards from the boulder. Two had dismounted and were kneeling as they fired. The third was shooting from his saddle.

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Jim shoved the carbine over the rim of the boulder, took a quick aim and shot at the mounted man. His bullet struck the horse. The animal reared, hung for long enough to let its rider leap clear, and flopped sidewise to the earth.

"Damn!" Jim grumbled. "I didn't want to kill that horse!"

Then he heard a shrill command, evidently from one of the four who were closing in from the right:

"Get back there, you fools! He'll get all of you before we can smoke him out."

The quick leap of one of the kneeling outlaws saved him from Jim's next shot, for the bullet kicked up dust in direct line with where he had been.

Even before the stern command had rung out, the unhorsed man had begun to run. The northerly wall of the cleft soon hid him. A moment later the other two were in their saddles and spurring southward. Jim knew, however, they were not in actual retreat.

"Well," he mused as he refilled the magazine of his carbine, "not a man in sight. He knew the seven were determined to kill him, and had only taken refuge behind the walls of the cleft.

Then two shots crashed out, rumbling in broken echoes against the cliff, and Jim saw his roan horse go down. For a minute he fought against a mad desire to rush out and openly give battle to these men. Then realising it was not a case of a horse's life, but his own, that he himself had just killed another man's horse, he held his fire.

It was time, during this lull of firing, to take stock, Jim decided. A look about told him he was too low for safety. He might hold off direct attack indefinitely, but there were the tops of the flaring walls, and the rim at the head of the cleft from where he might be reached with deadly bullets.

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He began to climb, taking advantage of boulders and the brush with which the steep floor of the cleft was tangled. He found that he could travel with scant chance of being seen by the men in the narrow valley. The brush was a combination of manzanita, ironwood and scrub mahogany, tangled with wild-rose and other briers. He went slowly because of rattlesnakes, and because he did not want to disturb the brush and thus disclose his position to his enemies.

He had negotiated a third of the cleft, which was about a hundred yards long, when he heard the crash of rifle-fire and the spang and whine of bullets. He peered through an opening in the brush and round the side of a boulder, and presently made out three men lying prone near the far side of the valley.

"Not good targets," he decided. "Besides, I haven't any ammunition to waste."

He had already discovered evidences of the rush of water down the cleft from occasional cloudbursts. Now from where he peered he traced the gulley that extended from the lower end of the cleft. It curved to right, and was hidden behind the vertical wall at that side.

Puffs of smoke soon showed him that other men were hidden under the bank of the gulley where it curved away. They, too, offered poor targets.

The crash of rifles and the spang of bullets convinced Jim that his attackers likely meant to rake the cleft from top to bottom in the hope that some chance bullet would find its mark.

"Not a bad idea for me," he mused. "Let 'em think they got me."

He decided now he would not fire another shot, at least for quite a while. If the outlaws at last thought

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they had got him they would come into the mouth of the cleft and he could drop some of them.

He slid slowly over rocks and under brush as the firing continued with deliberate, ominous steadiness. At each report hot air seemed to be driven into the cleft, then to rush out with thunderous echoes.

Jim gained a secure position a little more than half way up the cleft. Looking between two boulders, and with a screen of brush overhead, he made out six widely separated men shooting into the cleft. The three lying flat on the far side of the narrow level offered poor targets because they were at too great a distance, but there was a temptation to try a few shots at the other three who occasionally showed heads and shoulders as they rose in the gulley to shoot.

For fully an hour Jim Barton remained screened while an occasional bullet ripped through the brush above him or whined off the rock behind which he had taken shelter. He was not frightened, though he realised the desperateness of his situation.

"I'll just wait, and maybe they'll decide they've got me. Then they'll come closer."

It was a wait to try the soul of any man, for the sun beat down mercilessly and not a breath of air stirred. Where the rocks were not shadowed by brush they were too hot to touch. As the systematic firing continued Jim took further stock of his situation. He had already forsaken hope of getting out of the cleft from its upper end unless some yet undiscovered shelf a goat might climb led out there. The top of the sheer wall at the right was not two hundred feet away. The one at the left was almost as near.

"Nice places up there for men to shoot from," Jim muttered grimly. "A fellow up there could see everything down here."

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A man on the rim at the head of the gulley could not see everything in its bottom, but certainly men on the crests of the side walls could sooner or later discover any living thing the size of a man hidden among the boulders and brush, and with little risk to themselves.

For another hour the slow shooting continued, broken by occasional silences during which Jim could hear the attackers shouting to one another, though not what they said. Though the sun had mercifully sunk behind the rim at the head of the rift, Jim licked his dry, cracked lips. In here without food or water, it would be hell. It would be worse without water than without food, at least for a few days.

"Maybe I should have brought along that old rattler," he mused with grim humour. "I could have eaten him in a pinch."

He was sanguine, however, that the desperadoes did not intend to let him remain alive here for long, perhaps not even for a day. They would make his annihilation swift and positive.

He had become aware of the pregnability of his position, so he paid more alert attention to the men who were shooting slowly into the cleft. The shadow of the westerly wall was now leaving the mouth of the rift. During a lull he heard more shouting. Then he saw the three men who were near the far side of the level leap up and run. They ducked into the gulley. For half an hour no shot was fired. The shadow crept across the level and began mounting the other slope.

"They're planning somethin'," Jim mused.

He wondered what it was. He knew they could gain the rim and attack from there. It would take them some time to do this, if it was their plan.

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Jim shuddered suddenly as he peered down the shadowy cleft.

"God! They may be scheming to wait till dark, then slip in and fire the brush in the bottom!" he breathed. "If they do, the fire will come up here like a whirlwind!"

The shadows were well up the opposite slope when the shooting was resumed. Jim soon saw it was from three rifles, that as many men were hidden in the curve of the narrow wash.

Not a horse had been visible since the two had raced away to the protection of the flaring wall at the left, and Jim had no way of knowing whether the missing men had taken to their mounts. The fact that four were missing, however, was proof enough that they were trying some new strategy.

Jim Barton tried to believe that the men who were out to get him would stop short of burning him out. He was certain enough that they were the Red Gash gang, also that the horseman he had seen coming down the red valley had been a messenger from Vernon with news of what had occurred there.

"By golly, I wish old Joe Holliday was here!" Jim muttered. "No, I don't. It's bad enough for me to be, without anybody else."

The logical conclusion was that the four missing men were on their way to the rim so they might attack from there. Jim found some little comfort in this surmise. It was better to be killed by a bullet than to be burned to death. If the brush at the lower end of the cleft were fired, he would be roasted as thoroughly as the rattlesnakes which infested the ground. He knew, however, that there was little danger of fire before dark unless one or more of the outlaws wanted to risk almost certain death in starting it.

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From where he peered between two huge rocks, Jim could see the gulley as it led straight away from the lower end of the brush and boulders, see the open flats at each side, see his dead horse lying down there. The grass and sage at the sides of the straight part of the wash were too sparse to carry fire to the edge of the tangle. A man would have to carry it, either across one of the open flats or by trying to crawl up the gulley.

"Well, if he does, I'll sure make him think somebody's still alive in here!"

Then Jim remembered that men might show on the rim at one side or the other at any moment. He must not risk forgetting that he was open to attack from up there. He crouched back, turned and began to climb slowly towards the very head of the trap from which he must extricate himself, or perish.

CHAPTER XIV

The shadow in the little gorge made it possible for Jim to crawl and climb with less danger of discovery through any agitation of the brush. He noted with satisfaction that the walls were narrowing more rapidly than he had expected. Though he had to keep a constant lookout for rattlesnakes, scorpions and tarantulas, he made good time. It was with grim pleasure that he discovered that the cliff at the head of the gorge overhung slightly.

"Won't give them a chance to roll boulders down on me, at least," he mused.

He was soon to experience a much greater pleasure,

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for as he came to a short stretch of bare rock above the last boulders and brush, he discovered a small "tank" in the hard sandstone. In it was more than a foot of water, reminder of the last storm.

Mindful that water was the most likely place for rattlers at this season, Jim looked quickly about. Though in here was already the gloom of twilight, he discovered two rattlesnakes coiled on a rock near the margin of the tank. He dared not risk shooting. That would betray to his besiegers that he was still alive, and tell them his location.

After stepping on two scorpions and one great, furry tarantula, he managed to use the barrel of his carbine to flip the rattlers towards the upper limit of the brush. They flew through the air, whirring, writhing, striking.

"Nice business. I'd like to sleep here all night in this company." He wondered, though, whether the deadly reptiles and insects were any more feral than the men who were after him, and decided they were not.

The basin that held the water was of smooth-washed rock. Jim took advantage of the remaining light to clear the area of scorpions, tarantulas and centipedes. Then he drank deeply, and bathed his head and face. He doubted that water had ever tasted as good, though while he drank he could not but think of the deadly creatures that had used this pool.

Jim now had time to take stock of his situation once more. His present hiding-place could not be seen from the rims at right and left, this because of the narrowness of the gorge at its upper end. He was in no danger of being discovered from below, he felt.

Though the sun was silvering the tops of the pines on the mesa towards Red Gash Valley, there was still light in the narrow level below the cleft. Now only

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occasional bullets ricochetted up the gorge or deadened themselves against rock.

"With seven to my one, they won't likely quit without giving me a siege," Jim reasoned as he watched and listened. "Well, I may get plenty hungry, but I won't die of thirst."

His one real fear was that of fire. If it should come up the gorge his chances would be slim indeed. He caught a remote other fear, that of dynamite. He soon put this aside, for it was highly improbable that cattle rustlers would have dynamite. If they had, it could be dropped from above, and that would be the end of Jim Barton.

His speculations were suddenly broken. He made out two men as they appeared in the dry gulley beyond the end of the cleft. Then a third climbed out of the wash. The converging walls brought their voices clearly.

"See anything of the ——?" one shouted.

Jim fondled his carbine, but the distance and the poor light made shooting out of the question.

"Don't see hide nor hair of him!" came a shout from above.

Jim knew instantly that men were on the rim, for that shout had come from the left side of the gorge. Up there a man was looking down, but into the lower and wider portion of the cleft.

"Damned if I can see anything of him!" a voice called from the opposite side. "Might be hid under the brush, Jack."

Littrell, who had Antrim and Draper with him at the mouth of the gorge, shouted back:

"Look close! There's plenty brush down there to hide a dozen men!"

A new voice at the left complained that the gorge

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was too gloomy for its owner to see much. A man on the other side said:

"It's more'n likely we got the ——!"

Jim's last doubts as to their savage intentions were gone now. These men would have no more qualms in killing him than he would have in killing a rattler. He was grimly exultant, however, over the fact that he was still alive, and that his attackers were puzzled.

The three below the gorge were now more plainly visible, and advancing slowly.

"Pour some lead down into 'er and see if you can wake him up!" Littrell shouted. "Rake 'er from end to end!"

The cleft began to churn with violent noise. The four outlaws on the rim searched out every cranny among the boulders with lead. Jim was vastly grateful for the overhanging cliff, the narrow, vertical walls. Then the three men at the mouth began to use their rifles as if no precaution must be overlooked in making the deadly job complete.

They shot low at the face of the overhanging cliff, and for ten minutes sprayed-lead and rock fragments showered down. Jim crawled into the farthermost portion of his prison and waited. When the bombardment had ended he crawled back to the smooth-washed barrier of rock where he had lain and watched.

"No sign of life down there, boss!" a man above and at the right shouted.

"Reckon if he was down there and kickin' we must have stopped him," called a voice from the opposite rim. "We sure raked the rocks and brush with lead!"

Littrell shouted for his men on top to shoot no more. He felt a touch on his arm and turned to face the hard-bitten Draper.

"What's the matter with that brush, Jack?"

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"What brush?" demanded the outlaw leader.

"That brush there in the gut. That brush is dry, and thick as hell in spots. It'll burn."

Littrell's hard face broke into a pleasurable grin.

"You mean roast him out?"

"Sure," Draper chuckled. "Likely we killed him already, but let's make sure, boss."

The outlaw leader immediately approved this suggestion. He believed the trapped man was already dead, but it was a wise precaution to fire the brush in the gorge and make sure.

"Aw, give the fool a chance," snarled the black-visaged Antrim. "If he wasn't killed soon after we run him in there, he'd done plenty more shootin' than he done. Give the —— a chance, I say! I never did like the idea of roastin' a man, dead or alive!"

"Aw hell, Black," chuckled Draper. "What's wrong with that? We all roast in hell at the end anyway. This jasper deserves a good burnin' for what he done for us at Vernon."

Littrell, face tense and eyes cold, looked at Antrim.

"Who the hell's runnin' this outfit, Black?"

"I ain't," snarled Antrim, "but if I was I wouldn't burn up a dead man. He's dead in there, damn it! Let the buzzards and the coyotes take care of him."

"Haw, haw!" chortled Draper. "Black's gittin' chicken-hearted, boss. He don't like roast meat."

"It ain't that," argued Antrim. "I just don't like the idea of roastin' a man after we've killed him. It's too low-down even for me."

The savage Draper was surprised, for always before Antrim had been one of the cruellest of the gang. Still, a man could never tell about the whims and superstitions of another, even an outlaw.

"You sayin' we can't fire that brush, Black?"

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Littrell demanded with ominous quiet. "If you are——"

The black-bearded rustler looked his leader squarely in the cold eyes, and shrugged.

"I ain't sayin' you can't, and you know it, Jack. But I am sayin' I ain't goin' to take no part in it. I don't like the idea, that's all."

Littrell laughed harshly, and retorted that they could fire the brush without Antrim's aid.

"Sure you can. One man with a match and a handful of grass can do it easy and I can't stop him."

Antrim slouched back and sat down on the bank of the wash. He sullenly made a cigarette. From the head of the gorge Jim Barton saw the flare of the match as the cigarette was lighted, and shivered, for he had taken into consideration the possible firing of the brush. He had not heard their argument, however.

"My God!" he muttered. "If they do that I'll suffocate with smoke at the very best. At least the heat will be hell."

He fought back a mad desire to open fire on the three he could dimly see, and breathed more easily when the match flame was snuffed out. They believed him dead, and if he opened fire they would know he was not. This would mean a siege, perhaps days of it. Yes, and in the night men might crawl into the gorge to see whether there were a live man in it. Jim laid his carbine back on the smooth rock.

"I'll have to wait and see what they are going to do," he told himself grimly. "Sure would like to put my boots under a table with some good grub on it though."

Jim's speculations over what was occurring were broken by Littrell's peremptory voice calling to the men on the rim:

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"Damn it! Come on down! We don't want to have to stay here all night!"

Jim could faintly hear the scuff of boots on the rocks above. Then the sounds were gone. He knew that some time must pass before the men reached the mouth of the gorge, for they must take a roundabout route from the rim.

Things did not look too bad now, he mused, though he was without a horse, and hungry. He did not know how far he was from Harlan Valley, but knew it was many miles.

When he could no longer make out the men at the mouth of the gorge he was certain he could not be seen by them because of the cliff shadow. He wriggled up, braced his back against the rock wall. He yearned for a smoke.

"Can't risk it," he told himself. "If they saw the flicker of one match it'd all be to do over again. I want something to eat before next week."

Through the flaring walls of the gorge he saw the stars come out one by one. The sky turned from gray to darker gray, to purple-black.

He had time for recapitulation now. He would be careful not to ride into another trap. How was he to reach Harlan Valley unless he walked?

"Good thing I have matches, even if I can't smoke. In the morning I'll shoot a jackrabbit and cook him. Never did like jack meat, but it'll be filling."

He thought about old Joe Holliday, about Ford. He visualised a burly, ruddy-faced gunman crumpling into a dusty street with a small bluish mark in the middle of his forehead.

In his imagination he was again on the rim looking down into beautiful Red Gash Valley.

"It's going to be hard to get those hellions out of that hangout," he mused. Then he chuckled with the

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thought of the irony of his situation. "I talk about getting them out, and they've got me cornered here like a coon up a tree."

He was not discouraged, however, for he felt that all he needed was patience. Usually he had plenty of that. He knew he could not venture from the gorge until his besiegers were gone. The faint drone of a voice, the occasional flare of a match told him that at least three were still at the mouth of the cleft.

Fortunately the shape of the gorge and its sheer end wall made sounds travel far and with some clarity. Probably two hours had passed since the men had been ordered down from the rim. The night was pitchy dark except for a very pale band of light along the ragged easterly horizon. Jim was beginning to feel a little cold because of the draught that sucked up the gorge. Looking at the pale band of light in the east, he thought there would be a moon in an hour or so.

Then he forgot the coming moon, for from below came the sound of a voice, the faint click of hooves on rocks. The four who had been on the rim were rejoining the three below. Jim tried to make his ears keener, but he could distinguish no words. Two matches flared, and in their brief and distant illumination he thought he could see the outlines of two men and as many horses. Then a voice was raised:

"Aw, the —— is dead! There wasn't a sign of life there in the gut!"

That, Jim decided, was the voice of one of the men who had been on the rim. He did not catch the reply, only the faint drone of a voice. He caught again the click of hooves on rocks. The sounds grew fainter, faded.

"By golly! They're going! They think they got me! I'll wait for an hour, then get out of here."

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It was a pleasant prospect, being out of this rock-walled trap, even afoot. He thoughtlessly rolled a smoke, but as he reached for a match remembered that he might still be watched. He crumpled paper and Durham in his fingers. To be prepared for departure he crawled to the tank and drank deeply. There was no telling when he would get water again, at least not until he should encounter the creek that ran from Red Gash Valley.

He was about ready to begin the perilous descent, which he well knew was fraught with the danger of rattlesnakes, scorpions and tarantulas, when he caught the faint flicker of what he took for a match at the lower end of the gorge. Then almost at once a flame leaped up, much nearer to his hiding-place than where he had seen the three men at dark.

The fire grew with uncanny swiftness, whirling a lurid, twisting plume onward. In its light Jim saw a man running, but not a single horse. He grabbed his carbine, but held it rigid. The running man disappeared behind the flaring right wall of the gorge.

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CHAPTER XV

JIM BARTON had no illusions as to what had been done below. For a few moments he was gripped by cold panic, the panic of a primitive thing caught in a trap which is soon to become a fiery furnace.

Then he was cool, contemplative, calm, like a courageous man at the foot of gallows steps. If he had to died he had to die. There was no climbing the sheer walls. To try to get down the gorge would be to meet the fire half-way. But Jim Barton did not believe he would die in the fire. There was the water. He mentally blessed it. It was going to be disagreeable, and hot, but he would not die.

The flames licked at the dry brush so avidly that already their glare was reflected upon the cliffs. Jim had the presence of mind even now to realise that the light would reach him and that he must keep low lest he be seen by the outlaws. He lay flat on the upward-curving smooth rock with his feet at the edge of the pool.

For a few minutes the flames rose and fell, dancing wildly, like the robes of some red demon. Down there the tangle of ironwood, manzanita and scrub mahogany was wider. The wind made the flames lick sideways, twist, flare upward, undulate.

So far the smoke was going more or less upward, the reflection from the flames stippling the blackish cliffs with garnet. Then Jim could hear the fire suck into the gorge with a roar as it was caught by a gust of wind from the plain and by the suck of its own draught.

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"Well, it's coming," he muttered as he looked at the bare twenty feet of brushless rock between him and the last fuel the fire could reach. "It's going to be plenty hot in here, too."

It took no little courage to do nothing but wait and face the fire. Jim knew he would have to face it, as some time he would have to face the end of life. There was a sort of grim fascination, however, in watching the waving, undulating pillars of flame, the blackish veils of smoke, the marvellous shifting of the stippling of garnet on the dark cliffs.

Each time it caught into a new bush the fire crackled, sputtered, sent a din with its smoke into the gorge. The smoke was beginning to conform roughly to the shape of the cleft bottom. In it frequently shone lurid masses of flame, like drifting, waving draperies.

The flaring walls that marked the lower end of the gorge were ruddy now, and the illumination extended well out into the gray level, framing distinctly each sage, each mesquite, even a few tall tufts of grass. Then Jim saw more out there on the level. A rider galloped into view. He was followed by another and another, until seven were visible. They bunched at the far side of the wash where it bent to the right.

Jim knew what they were there for, to make certain he had been killed, to see him burn, or to kill him with bullets if he had not otherwise died. He gripped his carbine.

"No," he muttered, "I mustn't do it. If I shoot they'll stick there till hell freezes over."

The billowing, undulating smoke made it possible for him to see the riders almost continuously, though there were times when view of them was obscured. They were gloating, of course, and he was glad he could not hear even the faint mumbles of their voices.

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"If I get out of here alive I'll sure run you hombres out of your hangout!" he promised grimly. "You skunks! I wouldn't try to roast out even my worst enemy!"

Fifty yards from where the fire had been started was a tangle of brush. Jim remembered it. It was twined among the boulders with briers, green and aged. He bore scratches to remind him of that tangle. It was where he had almost put a hand on a great tarantula. He waited eagerly, fearfully, for the fire to reach that patch of brush, which was wide and thick. When the flames caught into it they crackled, roared, hissed, sent up pillars of waving fire, columns of sparks, dense clouds of smoke that were flattened and sucked into the gorge. The seven riders out on the level were hidden as if by black eternity, but Jim knew they were still there.

They sat their horses, grouped and watching the fire, some chuckling as the glow shone red on their faces. The black-visaged Antrim looked more at the hard-bitten leader than at the raging flames, however. He said nothing, and the red reflection in his dark eyes gave them a sullen, sinister look.

"The cruel ——!" he muttered to himself. "I didn't believe he'd sanction a thing like this! I hope that feller in there met his end by a bullet."

In less than two minutes the fire had consumed all the upper portion of the tangled mass of brush and briers, but its red fingers searched downward and among the rocks for more fuel. It leaped on, now sucked fiercely by its own draught. One minute Jim stared at a dense black pall of smoke. The next he saw it shot with lurid fire. Then it swept upward to afford a momentary glimpse of the fire itself.

Where the gorge steepened the fire increased its speed, left underneath a clear area which made it

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possible for its light to be reflected even upon the back of the shell-like cavern at the edge of which Jim Barton lay. He tried to penetrate the smoke to see whether the outlaws were still on the level outside, but could not. So far he had felt little effect from the smoke, though already his face was hot from the approaching fire.

Then out of the uppermost brush came a flight on which he had not taken time to figure. The snakes and poisonous insects had begun their flight from the fire towards the water and brushless rock. The vanguard was composed of nearly a score of frantically squealing wood-rats. Then came three rattlers, worming their way swiftly up the bare rock. Though the great majority of the venomous things had succumbed or would succumb to the fire, those near the upper end of the brush were managing to escape. The light was now so bright Jim could see distinctly far beyond the brush, the heat so intense he had to hold a hand before his face.

Out of the very edge of the low brush came four tarantulas, frantic, fierce, their furry legs extended full length. They looked deadly and ludicrous and comical, with the swift motion of their legs, the readiness of their mandibles, the beady glare of their little eyes. Despite his own peril Jim smiled as he looked at them.

"Golly!" he muttered. "They're on the war-path and scared to death!"

He paid no attention to the panic-stricken rats. They wanted to reach the water. Well, let them have it. But rattlesnakes and tarantulas were different. They were fleeing for the safety of the water, too, but Jim knew he would soon need that water himself, and he did not relish the prospect of sharing it with rattlers and great hairy spiders.

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He carefully levered the cartridges from the chamber of his carbine, reversed the weapon. Two reptiles went rattling and writhing back. One of them was leaped upon by two of the tarantulas that immediately went to work with their cutting mandibles. This deadly combat gave Jim time to smash the head of the third rattler and then to crush the other two tarantulas as they marched frantically up the smooth rock.

Then, as if they had discovered they were fighting a dying enemy, or that the fire was much too close, the remaining tarantulas deserted the writhing snake and sprang to the rock. Jim smashed them with the stock of his carbine, and drew in a deep breath.

"Whew! I hope no more of 'em are coming!"

He found he could no longer face the heat without suffering blistered face and blinded eyes. He swiftly backed into the pool, rolled over. About the edges rats scurried and squealed. Their swiftly moving eyes shone like flying dots of fire. Some of them raced madly about the smooth rise of rock on which Jim had lain.

The narrow gorge was filled with the roar of a furnace. The swirling smoke obscured the stars. It seemed to form a black robe that might reach to infinity. Then from out of it came a series of wild, triumphant yells, audible even above the noise of the dying fire. Jim could not distinguish words, but he knew well enough the outlaws were exulting because he was in that furnace.

The moon was nearing meridian when Jim Barton crawled from the mouth of the gorge and on to the protection of the dead horse. He was blackened and blistered. His clothing had a hundred holes in them. When he had started he had reasoned he had waited

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long enough for the rocks to partially cool and for the fire to burn out, but he had not. He had found rocks from which dull fire had seemed to jump to his hands, had crawled on to masses of ashes that had proved to be red coals underneath.

Yet now for the first time in four hours he drew in deep gulps of air untainted by smoke and heat. Before him lay the narrow valley, silvery and gorgeous under the moon. On the other slope bushes and rocks stood out clearly. Not a rider was visible, not a man, not a riderless horse. Jim drew a deeper breath. They had gone, believing they had roasted him if their bullets had not got him before.

It was after midnight when Jack Littrell led his men along the moon-flooded floor of Red Gash Valley and to the corral back of the silent cabin. They unsaddled and tramped round to the front door of the house. The noise of their coming had roused LaGuire, and Chico, the Mexican. Chico rolled from his blankets and lit a candle.

"Sangre de Cristo!" he ejaculated. "You hombres have do the good business, no?"

"Hey, greaser, rustle us out some grub and some hot coffee!" ordered Littrell. "Sure we done some good business!"

Jubilant outlaw hilarity dragged LaGuire from his bunk.

"Roll out, you damned Frenchy!"

"Yeah, roll out and hear the news!"

"That —— you come from Vernon to tell us about ain't goin' to shoot no more men between the eyes, I reckon!"

"He sure as hell ain't goin' to ride no more rims and look down into Red Gash!" Ritter swore, then laughed. "If you want some good-done hombre,

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Frenchy, just ride over to the gash in the black wall!"

A bottle was produced. As it went from man to man the story was told in brief. Littrell said very little, and Antrim nothing at all. He took a long drag at the whisky bottle. Frenchy drank, wiped his lean, swarthy face, slapped a leg.

"Sacre! But that is the good news! I hoped I had come in time for you to make an end to that ——!"

"We sure made an end to him," chuckled Kirkup. "We finished that hombre up proper."

They drank more, talked more, ate ravenously, rolled into their bunks. It had been a good day's work. Red Gash Valley was a safe hangout once more.

Getting into the wash, Jim Barton slipped along it. For half an hour he reconnoitered, watched, listened. When he was convinced that the seven outlaws were gone he climbed from the wash. The moonlight made it possible for him to pick up the trail of the horses. It led south-east. This gave him immense pleasure.

"They figured they had got me sure," he told himself with a grim smile. It was good to hear the sound of his own voice. "Well, we'll see what the next play is."

Instead of trying to follow the trail of the horses, Jim took its general direction, climbing ridges, out of ravines. He gained the mesa and picked up the trail, found where it descended towards the rubble of a creek.

About the time the outlaws rolled into their bunks, gorged, tired, half-drunk, Jim Barton was at the rampart of boulders at the lower end of Red Gash Valley. He cautiously rounded the boulders, looked at the moon-flooded, grassy floor, the towering walls.

He did not follow the open now, but kept to the

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timber of the creek and in this way came to the corral back of the outlaw cabin. Saddles lay about, straddled the fence. One hung by a stirrup from a spike driven into a cottonwood.

Working leisurely, yet all the while conscious of danger, Jim selected a saddle, bridle, spurs. He carried them to the creek, waded with them to the other side. He returned and, after listening intently, selected a horse. In the stippled moonlight that came through the foliage of the cottonwoods it looked like a good bay. He stealthily and slowly led the animal from the corral and across the creek.

CHAPTER XVI

THE Bar H, like the Circle N, was careful to keep its cattle from ranging too near the mouth of Red Gash Valley. The previous evening Joe Gilson, foreman of the former outfit, had ordered three cowboys to ride towards Red Gash and turn back any cattle they found.

The three were Lanky Higgins, Windy Irwin and Frank Fletcher. They left the ranch at sunrise and by noon were through with their work and ready to start towards the valley with about a hundred cattle which they would leave nearer the home place.

Riding hard, Windy chased a rebellious steer over a rise, turned him and rode back at a more leisurely pace. On the rise he reined in to take a look to northward. Windy had never had any great desire to ride into Red Gash Valley, but he did have a curious interest in the rustler hangout. What he saw now was a solitary rider perhaps a mile away.

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"Huh! Wonder who that jasper is!"

Windy was of the opinion that the rider was one of the Red Gash gang and that he had been watching the gathering of the cattle. He told himself:

"That feller's got plenty nerve, awatchin' us thataway!"

He trotted down the slope and hailed Frank and Lanky, and told them of the discovery. Frank ventured that the lone rider might be one of Nesbit's men.

"Don't believe it!" Windy denied positively. "I'd know a Circle N buckeroo ten miles off."

"You would like hell!" drawled Fletcher.

"Well, he ain't no Circle N rider, anyway."

Dismounting, they let the cattle straggle on and went to where they could look without being seen. The horseman was closer now, and coming directly on.

"If he's one of the Red Gash outfit we orter kill him," Windy swore heroically. "I always did want to rub out one of them thieves."

Though Fletcher and Lanky said they would like to kill the whole rustler gang, they doubted the advisability of waylaying this rider, whoever he was.

"Well, I'm sure goin' to capture the maverick!" Windy declared. "He's gotta give an account of hisself to me!"

They took strategic positions so when the horseman came into the pass between the low hills he was confronted by three cowboys with businesslike guns in their hands and cold stares on their faces.

The man they covered was soiled, blackened, beard-stubbled. His overalls and shirt had many marks that looked like burned holes. His gray eyes were bloodshot but steady. He smiled at their hostility.

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"Howdy, boys," he drawled. He made no movement of hand towards weapon.

Windy was feeling very courageous, with two good men to back him, so he elected himself spokesman for the trio.

"Well, you low-down, ornery pup, who are you?" he demanded. "Where you goin', and what you doin' here on the Bar H range? Make a explanation pronto, or I'll sure put a large hole in you, feller! You one of them cattle thieves and all-round hellions from Red Gash? If you are your name's sure mud, stranger!"

The stranger's eyes flickered and he seemed to smile a very little.

"Best tell your business, hombre, if you don't want to tell us your name," suggested Lanky. "We savvy you don't belong to the Circle N."

"And he sure ain't no Bar H man!" added Fletcher as he spurred to where he could block any attempt at escape.

Though he undoubtedly looked a hard specimen, the stranger spoke coolly and as if he was not frightened. He said he knew of no reason why he should not tell his name. It was Jim Barton.

"Guess that's the name you go by now," growled Windy. "Gawd knows what your maw named you at the start. But names don't matter. What you doin' here on this range?"

"Just ridin' across it," drawled Jim. He was not oblivious to his danger, but he had been in too much danger recently to think this one looked very great by comparison.

"Well, what you ridin' across it for?" Windy thrust out his chin. "Us, we're Bar H men, and we don't nohow cotton to nobody that comes from toward Red Gash Valley!"

For a full minute Lanky had been staring at the big

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bay horse. Now he surged to where he could see its right side.

"Look here, boys!" he commanded suddenly. "This is that Pete hoss!"

The three cowboys knew the animal immediately, once they had taken a good look at it. Any doubt was removed by the brand it wore—the Bar H.

"The Red Gash gang stole that hoss a year ago!" Fletcher swore.

"And this here hoss thief's got the nerve to ride him back on to Bar H range!" added Lanky.

Lest one of the cowboys should make a movement of hand as a signal to shoot, Jim Barton kept his own hands on the horn of his saddle. He tried to convince them he had stolen the horse, but from the Red Gash outfit and not from the Bar H. He got derisive laughter in return.

"You a-stealin' that hoss from the Red Gash outfit!" Windy sneered. "Haw, haw! A man sure is plumb low-down when he steals a hoss from hisself!"

When Jim calmly reiterated what he had said, he got more scorn and laughter, with some threats and abuse added. He paled perceptibly under his stubble of blond beard, a paleness that even the smoke smudge did not hide.

"You look like you'd been put into a fire, hombre," Lanky said. "Least you're burned clean full of little holes."

"Some big ones," Fletcher corrected. "He must've been mighty drunk. Fall into the campfire, hoss thief?"

Jim explained that he had been trapped in a brushy gorge by the Red Gash outlaws and the brush fired.

"Haw, haw, haw!" chortled Lanky. "That's a good one!"

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Windy leaned forward and peered sardonically and belligerently at Jim.

"He don't look like he's got much brains," he declared. "He sure ain't if he 'spects us to swaller a story like that. I'd say he's at least a damned hoss thief, boys."

Lanky and Frank concurred in this opinion. Windy snarled, then laughed scornfully.

"Reckon you'll tell us next you was takin' that stole hoss back to the Bar H!"

"I was lookin' for the Bar H ranch," Jim answered, knowing that he had little chance of being believed. Here was proof of the hatred of the ranchers for the outlaws of Red Gash.

He was not surprised that the three warlike riders had not disarmed him. They had him so completely covered with their pistols that the slightest movement towards his own would be suicide.

"Yeah," drawled Windy, "we sure got us a specimen, boys. Imagine a Red Gash outlaw turnin' good! And he's a-takin' that stole hoss back to tell the boss he's mighty sorry he done stole it. Say, feller, you ain't suddenly got religion, have you?"

Jim was reluctant to reveal his real purpose here. He was to report to a man named John Nesbit. He saw, however, the triumph and deadly purpose in the eyes of the three riders.

"It's best that I tell you why I'm here, I reckon," he began. "I admit it looks like things were against me, and that this is a Bar H horse that was stolen, but it was night when I took him and I didn't have time to examine his brand. I'm here to wipe out the Red Gash gang. I——"

Derisive laughter and profane disbelief checked him.

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"He's sure one large liar," drawled Lanky as he kept eyes and gun steady.

"Biggest durned liar I ever run across," said Windy. "Trouble is he can't tell lies as us fellers'll swaller. There's one thing certain though."

"It's damned certain he's a horse thief!" put in Fletcher.

"A hoss thief's the worst sort of human animal, boys," Windy declared. "There's only one way to treat him."

"Sure!" Lanky's agreement was ominous and complete.

"Yeah," sneered Fletcher, "they're only good for buzzard feed."

Jim wondered suddenly whether he had been in any more danger in the burning gorge than he was now. There was no levity or joking in the looks of the three riders, no more than there was in the ends of their guns. He was fully aware that his story sounded unreasonable and incredible, since he had actually come from the direction of Red Gash Valley on a horse that had been stolen from the Bar H.

"Let me explain this a little more, boys," he requested. "I have some papers in my coat pocket."

"You move a hand," threatened Windy, "and I'll put a hole through you, hombre!"

Jim would have been senselessly angry had he not learned long since that such anger is a poor thing when a man is cornered. The looks on the three sun-browned faces were of themselves ample proof that their owners meant even more than they said.

"I'm sorry you boys don't believe me. If you will let me get those papers out of my pocket or get them yourselves, I reckon we can straighten out this misunderstanding."

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Windy retorted that as far as he was concerned there was no misunderstanding. He was looking at a damned fool horse thief and that was all there was to it.

"Aw, let's see if he has anything to show who he is," Fletcher ventured. He was a new hand at the Bar H and had never seen a man shot or hanged. Now that such a spectacle seemed imminent, he shrank from it.

"Yeah, and give him a chance to grab one of them pistols of his?" Windy sneered. "I guess not! Hoss thieves deserve hangin', and that's what this one's goin' to get!"

"Bet your life!" Lanky agreed. "You fellers keep him covered while I take his artillery."

Chico, whose work it was to guard the lower end of the valley during daylight hours, was the first of the outlaws to awaken. This was at dawn, for Littrell's cruel domination of the outfit had taught the Mexican to be out early and to stay late.

Chico had barely kindled a fire in the fireplace when LaGuire rolled from his bunk. He planned to start for Vernon as soon as he could get breakfast.

"Go out and see if my horse is all right, Chico," LaGuire said softly so he would not rouse the outlaws who had come in late. He had left the horse picketed on good grass.

Chico found the animal safe, and shifted the picket-pin. He was back at the rear of the cabin when LaGuire came out.

"Caramba!" cried the Mexican as he looked towards the corral and saw only six horses there. "What is she become of those beeg bay horse?"

LaGuire said it was likely that the missing horse had been turned out to graze.

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"No, no!" protested Chico. "She is not so!"

"Why not?"

"I tell you Jack is always damn' careful of thees beeg horse! She is always jump the fence down below when he is let him out, and so always we keep him in the corral every night, señor."

Chico hurried into the cabin and shouted the alarm. Littrell cursed drowsily, but awoke. By this time the other outlaws were out of bed. Half-dressed, they rushed out, and found that the big bay was indeed missing. This was strange, for all knew that seven horses had been left in the corral. Only LaGuire had picketed his mount outside.

"Say!" shouted Kirkup suddenly. "Say, Jack! Your saddle's missin', too! It ain't there on that cottonwood where you usual leave it!"

Littrell was now silent, tight-faced. He had prized that bay horse, not merely because he had stolen it, but because it had been the finest mount the lawless outfit had.

Trackers that they all were, they quickly found where the animal had been led from the corral and across the creek. They also found fresh bootprints. There seemed but one explanation. Somebody had stolen into the valley between midnight and dawn and taken horse and saddle.

"Say, I wonder if it was that hombre we trapped there in the gorge?" Antrim demanded hopefully.

A few minutes of argument left this question unanswered.

"Kirk, you saddle a horse and ride down to the lower end of the valley," Littrell ordered. "If there's any sign it'll be in the dusty trail there."

Ritter was told to ride in the other direction to look for sign, so the direction taken by the horse thief could be established.

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Tired and sleepy as the seven rustlers were, there was no more thought of rest. Kirkup was back by the time breakfast was ready, with the news that he had not only found the fresh tracks of a horse leading towards Harlan Valley, but also the comparatively new tracks of a man's boots, and these coming round the jumbled pile of boulders into Red Gash. A few minutes later Ritter returned and reported that he had made no discoveries in the upper end of the outlaw valley.

"Maybe that —— did get away alive," Littrell admitted grimly. "Nash, you and Draper ride over to the gash in the black wall and see, and ride hard. Wait, eat first."

Not one of the outlaws but had lain down to sleep with the assurance that they would not be molested. Now if the man they had tried to kill, then incinerate, had escaped alive conditions might be different.

"Aw, if the —— got away, let him go," Antrim snarled as he straddled a stool at the table. "All he got away with is a horse."

Littrell shot the black-bearded outlaw a contemptuous look.

"That was my horse, Black," he said with deadly quiet. "This is not your put-in. Besides, if Barton got away that's my business, too. I'm runnin' this outfit."

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CHAPTER XVII

It was noon when Nashwilder and Draper returned and made their report. Littrell stared hard at them. He found it difficult to believe that Barton had not been killed and roasted in the gorge.

"You men climbed through the gorge?" he demanded.

"Sure," said Nashwilder. "We went clean to the wall. Wasn't anything there at all except some dead rattlers and tarantulas, boss."

The outlaw leader stamped about and cursed.

"Sorry, Jack," spoke up Ritter, "but as for me I never figured that jigger could get out of there alive. He must've been a damned salamander."

"We were a lot of fools for lettin' him get out!" Littrell swore. "We orter waited to made good and sure."

Littrell had personally ridden to the lower end of the valley before noon, and had seen the tracks of the stolen horse that led down the creek trail. Doubtless the man on the bay horse was headed for the Bar H or the Nesbit ranch.

LaGuire had postponed his departure to get definite news. Now as he prepared to leave for Vernon, Littrell said:

"Tell Ford it may be some time before we can deliver him any cattle, Frenchy. Tell him he best send us word when he can handle more cows."

LaGuire laughed callously.

"Maybe we best find the old —— first, Jack. Maybe he'll be as hard to find as cattle to steal."

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"We'll find the cattle," Littrell retorted. "Don't worry about that, Frenchy."

"And old Ford's sure to show up," Ritter put in. "He's too slippery to let anybody jail him for long."

LaGuire was in the saddle ready to ride. Littrell strode beside the horse until they were out of earshot of the men before the cabin.

"You might tell Ford this, too, Frenchy," he said. "If he figures it's all right, we'll manage to rub out that old Holliday next time we hit Vernon. It seems to me if we're in for trouble it's Holliday that's at the bottom of it."

Frenchy rode away. Instead of rejoining his men, Littrell walked slowly towards the creek. He believed there was to be trouble, and serious trouble. He cursed himself and his men for having allowed Jim Barton to escape.

That escape was something to be considered. There were other things that would bear serious thought, too. Among them were Lije Ford's strange disappearance, the death of the gunfighter, Malloy, and the appearance of Barton on the rim above Red Gash.

"It's an even bet that —— is on his way to Harlan Valley to start something," Littrell decided.

Because he did not know what that something would be, the outlaw was disturbed. Vanity, as much as money, made him unwilling to take his men and desert Red Gash Valley. Too, it would not be easy for them to find another such stronghold and another such range as Harlan Valley from which to steal cattle. He walked slowly back to the front of the cabin, where he found his men joking callously, and profanely deploring Barton's miraculous escape from the fiery gorge.

"Oh, to hell with him!" Littrell snarled. "He's gone. We've got to look at this straight."

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'He pointed out that as Barton had done much damage in Vernon, and had later appeared here to survey the rendezvous, he was probably on his way to join forces with the Harlan Valley ranchers.

"What you got to make you figger 'er that way, boss?" Ritter asked. "He might have just run this way after he rubbed Malloy out. Yeah, likely he killed old Ford, too."

"And if he rubbed out Ford, there ain't no more chance for us to peddle rustled cows over there," declared Kirkup.

Littrell's steely eyes turned colder.

"Let me do the talkin'," he commanded.

Five men told him to go ahead and talk. Antrim, the only one not completely dominated by the leader, stared sullenly.

"Well, listen," Littrell ordered. "I got a strong hunch we ain't goin' to be able to rustle any more Bar H and Circle N cattle for some time. That don't mean we got to stay here idle though. Life's too damned short for that."

"And too uncomfortable here in these mountains," added Andrus, a lonely note in his voice. "I ain't seen a woman or had a good drink for months, boss."

"You're no worse off than the rest of us that way," Ritter laughed. "We got plenty grub and reasonable whisky though."

Again Littrell ordered attention.

"We don't have to rustle cattle entirely," he resumed. "There's that bank in Maguey. We may decide to rob it. I think we will."

"Suits me," declared Antrim. "I never was too fond of stealin' cattle."

"Too hard work, Black?" Ritter inquired.

"Not the hard work," Antrim growled, "but as

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long as I got to be outside the law I'd rather take a chance on big money quick."

Though now, as before, Littrell kept close rein on his inner emotions, the enthusiasm of the men rose as they talked of looting the Maguey bank.

"Look here, boys!" Kirkup demanded. "What's the matter with ridin' in and stickin' up the sheebang while we're waitin' to see what's become of old Ford and that —— as got out of the gorge last night?"

While Littrell would announce no decision, he led them to believe they would tackle the bank-looting job within the next few days. Kirkup suddenly jumped to his feet, his eyes bright.

"Jack, what about stealin' that Harlan girl at the same time, I want to know? There's a chance to make some sure-enough dinero!"

"Yeah, and put a twister on old Harlan's nose at the same time, too!" Ritter swore.

Littrell began to pace nervously to and fro, head bent in thought. His men knew he was going to make a decision soon. He stopped.

"Maybe we can figure out that job, too," he declared. "If we can grab hold of the girl, Harlan will pay damned well to get her back."

"You bet!" yipped Ritter. "And maybe after he gets her back he won't be too riled if we take some more of his cattle. We onct get that gal, and we'll sure have her old man where we want him, boss."

Antrim listened, taking no part in the discussion until it had been agreed that the bank should be robbed and Nancy Harlan kidnapped, if it were reasonably possible to do the latter at the same time. He rose now.

"Let me put this straight to all of you," he said. "I'm plumb willin' to take part in the lootin' of a bank or a stagecoach or stealin' cows, or anything

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decent, but damned if I'll take part in kidnappin' any man's girl! That's what I call dirty business."

The others, with the exception of Littrell, laughingly and callously told Antrim that any kind of outlawry was dirty business.

"Aw, Black's gone chicken-hearted," sneered Draper. "That's what ails him."

"Just the same," Antrim insisted, "I ain't takin' part in the stealin' of no girl. I'm an outlaw and I ain't ashamed to admit it, but damned if I'm goin' to get so low-down I have to resort to kidnappin'."

Littrell said nothing at all, but his face was tighter and his eyes colder than before. Antrim returned his look with sullen defiance. Each man knew the hate of the other, measured it.

"What I said stands, Jack," said Antrim finally.

Littrell neither smiled nor frowned, but lifted a lean, wide shoulder.

"All right, Black. If you're so damned soft you won't steal a gal, you can help us rob the bank."

The others, fully aware of the hate between Littrell and Antrim, felt that the cold tension was not broken. In trying to break it, at least temporarily, Ritter demanded:

"When we goin' to tackle that bank job, Boss? I'm cravin' action."

Littrell thoughtfully rolled a cigarette.

"Likely inside a few days. I'll think it over. I want some action, too."

Presently Ritter and Kirkup, who were cronies, rose and sauntered back to the corral.

"Black's set on killin' the boss one of these days," said Kirkup softly.

Ritter smiled.

"Yeah? He is, is he? Say, Jack's as fast as chain-lightnin' with a pistol, and Black orter know it.

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Besides, he knows Black hates him like a rattler. I'm puttin' my dinero on the boss, Kirk."

During the twenty-odd miles he had ridden the horse he had stolen in Red Gash, Jim Barton had learned the mettle and stamina of the animal. The bay was really an extraordinary mount, one to gladden the heart of any cowboy.

And here, within a few minutes, he had seen that the three Bar H cowboys, swollen with the heroic importance of what they considered their right and duty, were impervious to reasoning and explanation.

Even now Jim had the sense of fair play to understand they had some justice on their side. He was from the direction of the outlaw hangout, and he was riding a horse that had undoubtedly been stolen from Harlan's ranch. Miles back he had dismounted to adjust the saddle and had discovered the Bar H on the bay's right stifle.

Now before Lanky, Windy and Fletcher had time to think of what might happen, Jim had tensed forward and clamped the big rowels of his stolen spurs into the sides of the bay horse. The animal leaped as if catapulted from some monster, hidden gun, almost downing Windy's horse as its neck was struck. Windy's mount was twisted half way round, and for a few seconds the rider was kept busy retaining his seat in the saddle while the animal scrambled back to secure footing.

The action of the man who was to have been hanged was so unexpected, and the swiftness of the bay in getting away so remarkable that the three cowboys barely knew what had happened before fleeing horse and rider were forty yards away and going fast. Lanky's and Fletcher's pistols were the first to roar.

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"Get him!" Windy yelled, feeling angry and sick. "Don't let him get away!"

With lead hailing round him and his horse, Jim rode into the straggling herd. Cows, calves, yearlings, steers fled, tails up and heads down. It was a wild stampede cut in two by a frantically running bay horse with a man crouched low in the saddle.

Almost before the cowboys could empty their guns Jim was out of range of the big six-shooters. One bullet had broken the neck of a yearling, but the cowboys gave the falling beast no heed as they raced in pursuit of the man they believed to be a member of the Red Gash outfit.

"Head him off!" Windy yipped. "Spread out! Get the——! No, run him straight!"

They used spurs savagely, and reloaded as they rode. This was no time to think of bridle reins. The three horses had been trained to run running cattle, and they naturally understood they were to overhaul the big bay horse.

Lanky shouted orders now. Fletcher shouted orders. Windy yelled his. They pounded along almost neck and neck.

Jim had been quick to see that his captors were armed only with six-shooters. He was soon out of range of those formidable weapons. He turned in his saddle now and waved a hand.

"Sorry to leave such good friends, boys! Why don't you get off and run?"

This strategy had the effect for which he had hoped. It caused the three cowboys to think only of the man they wanted and not of any strategy by which they might overtake him. They raced straight after him, yelling commands for him to stop, shooting occasionally.

Jim had seen a long swale with a low hill at each

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side. With the bay running magnificently, he raced into the swale, along it. He glanced back and saw that his pursuers were fully two hundred yards behind, then used reins and knees. The horse swung sharply and rounded the end of a hill at the left. They were little more than hidden from the swale when Jim hauled him to a stop. He sprang from the saddle and in the same movement dragged the reins over the head of the blowing horse.

As he dropped them from one hand he jerked his carbine from the boot with the other. He sprang to the low rise, saw the three Bar H men a hundred and fifty yards away and coming fast.

"There's the —— now!" Windy shouted.

"And he's lost his nerve, too!" Lanky yelled.

"We sure got him!" yipped Fletcher triumphantly, as he and the others tightened on reins. They were so certain of their quarry that they hauled their horses to a trot. They reloaded chambers that were empty.

Jim waited until they were less than a hundred yards away. Then he whipped the carbine to his shoulder and cradled a cheek against its stock.

As the carbine cracked a little geyser of dust spurted almost at the feet of Windy's horse. The animal slid to a stop, reared. Lanky and Fletcher hauled in their mounts.

For once Windy's loquacity was gone. He stared, while his jaw muscles hung loose. Fletcher and Lanky lifted their Colts, but lowered them as the carbine barked again.

"Better grab some sense," Jim called. "You three can't get out of that hollow before I kill you all. I've got a rifle, you see. Throw those pistols away!"

"The—son of a—gun!" muttered Lanky, and felt no humour at all.

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"Throw those pistols away!" repeated Jim Barton.

"I'll be damned if I do!" Windy shrilled feebly.

The carbine barked once more. Windy ducked low and fast as he thought he heard the whistle of a bullet on the rise.

"Now, how about grabbin' a little brains?" called Jim Barton.

CHAPTER XVIII

It was sunset when three humbled but indignant cowboys rode into the grounds at the Bar H. Behind them came a disreputable but determined rider on a big gray horse. He was in entire command of the situation.

Since John Nesbit and the old man had arrived about noon, Nancy Harlan had alternated between fearful doubt and pleasant anticipation. Her father and the other two men had talked much, and she had listened when she could. They were talking in the main room of the ranch-house and she was standing in the doorway intent upon what they were saying when she heard the tramp of hooves. She whirled.

"Why, there's Windy and Frank and Lanky!" she cried. "There's another man with them!"

Her surprised tone brought her father and Nesbit to the porch. The old man followed, blinking. The man on the bay ordered his prisoners to rein up. Besides his own weapons, he carried three revolvers and belts, these latter hanging from the horn of his saddle.

Windy's emotional pressure had reached the point

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where explosion was the only way out. He turned in his saddle and pointed dramatically.

"That there lousy outlaw surprised us and fetched us in!" he yelled. "Hang the ——!"

"Why, Windy!" Nancy cried wonderingly. The man with so many guns did not look too reassuring.

"Well, we're here," muttered Lanky, and wished he were somewhere else.

Fletcher had nothing to say.

"Durned if that ain't the horse I lost a year or so ago," declared Harlan. "That's the same bay! You say——"

"I say he's a durned hoss thief!" roared Windy. "He's got religion or somethin', though, boss, 'cause he was fool enough to fetch back that stole hoss."

The old man hobbled from the porch. He thrust forward his hoary head, and blinked. He uttered a pleased cackle.

"I'll be gol-durned!" he shrilled. "It's him! It's him!"

The three cowboys gaped. They had never before seen this white-bearded old man.

"Howdy, Mr. Holliday," drawled Jim. "Glad to see you here, sir."

He swung to the ground and grasped the old man's eager hand. The cowboys had now forgotten their indignation. Their faces were comical with surprise and dejection.

"Come hyar, Nesbit! Come hyar, Harlan!" Holliday commanded. "Hyar's the fellow we been worrin' about. This hyar's Jim Barton!"

As the ranchers went to take the newcomer's grimy hand Nancy stood riveted to the porch, wondering and vastly disappointed. This tall, blackened, beard-stubbled individual in no way resembled the hero she had pictured from old Joe's glowing description. He

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looked more like a tramp who had somehow managed to get a fine horse. And the horse was one that had been stolen from her father.

What she heard, however, soon convinced her that this man was the Jim Barton she had heard about and very favourably, the man who, according to old Joe, had killed Malloy, the gunfighter.

The three disillusioned cowboys were staring at one another in consternation. They paid no attention to Joe Gilson, the foreman, and the other cowboys who were grouping about.

"My gosh!" muttered Windy. "He was tellin' the truth, wasn't he?"

"And wouldn't we have just played hell if we'd hung him?" mumbled Lanky. "But he still looks plenty tough."

Fletcher had not yet found his voice.

Now Nancy sprang from the porch and confronted the crestfallen cowboys.

"What are you saying?" she demanded as her eyes flashed. "What have you fools been doing now?"

"We—we gotta take care of our broncs," Windy mumbled.

"Yeah, they're plumb tuckered out," added Lanky, grinning sheepishly.

Fletcher was already on the way to the corral. They followed, feeling as if they were still under the menace of Jim Barton's eyes and guns.

"We'll sure get our time for this!" Lanky groaned.

"And that lousy lookin' son of a gun seems to be some important," Windy muttered as he dismounted wearily. "It sure looks to me like we'd made one of them there fox-paws."

"We mighty near played hell!" corrected Fletcher.

"We sure did!" Windy jerked the latigo of his saddle.

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In front of the ranch-house old Joe Holliday was shrilling:

"Come hyar, gal! Come hyar! Hyar's the man I was tellin' ye about!"

Nancy went eagerly, yet a little frightened and doubtful. She forgot the stubble of beard, the dirt, the soiled and torn clothes that seemed to have been burned by a hundred little fires, however, as the tall newcomer looked at her and smiled with his eyes. The eyes seemed to belong to such a man as old Mr. Holliday had been telling about.

"This is my daughter, Nancy," Harlan was saying. "Nancy, this is Jim Barton, the man we expected."

As she took the grimy, outstretched hand Nancy saw Barton's eyes flinch for a moment, then smile.

"How do you do, Mr. Barton," she faltered. "Oh, did I hurt you, sir?"

Before he could answer she caught his hand with both of hers and turned it palm upward.

"Why, it's all blistered, Mr. Barton! It looks as if it had been burned!"

Jim hurriedly drew the hand away.

"It was burned a little, I reckon, Miss Harlan."

"A little? Why, there are a dozen blisters on it! Is the other one——?"

She paled as she drew back to see him better. Nobody with as many holes as he had in his clothes could have got them without having been in a fire. He looked as if he had been sprayed with coals, for in spots his underclothes showed through his overalls and shirt, in other places his bare skin.

"Say," old Joe demanded suddenly, "what ye been doin', Jim, rollin' in yer campfire?"

There were gasps and muttered oaths of amazement as Jim told briefly of his experience with the Red

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Gash outlaws. Nancy's brown eyes were large with wonder and horror as they looked into his.

"They tried to—to burn you to death, Mr. Barton?"

"Well, they smoked me some," Jim said. "It could have been worse."

Gilson, the cowboys, the ranchers, old Joe, all began firing questions. Nancy cried out for them to cease.

"For goodness' sake! Don't you see that Mr. Barton is hurt? Where is Mother? We must take care of his burns!"

Fortunately, Jim's burns had been superficial, and though his hands were tender the worst of the pain had passed. He told the girl he needed no attention.

"But you do," she insisted. "You come right into the house and Mother and I will attend to your burns!"

"If it won't be too much trouble," he conceded. "I'm a dirty specimen, though, to go into anybody's house. I feel a little like a horse thief, Miss Harlan."

"Why?"

Pain and narrow escapes had not robbed Jim Barton of his sense of humour. He smiled as he told a little of his experience with the three Bar H riders.

"Wal, I'll be gol-durned!" old Joe Holliday roared. "So them fools tuk ye fer a hoss thief and tried to hang ye, eh? And when ye got away they tried to stop ye with bullets?" He glared about wrathfully. "Whar air them durned fools? They wouldn't take a man's word! I'll tend to 'em!"

Though still remembering his narrow escape, Jim had to laugh as he told more of his experience with Windy, Fletcher and Lanky. He spoke, however, in their defence. They had had every right to suspect him.

"That doesn't make a bit of difference!" cried

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Nancy. "They should have just brought you in here. Imagine them thinking they had the right to hang you! And shooting at you! I wonder where they are now!"

In her indignation Nancy forgot she wanted to bandage the newcomer's hands. She marched away and found the three sheepish cowboys sitting down to supper in the cook-house.

"Aw, Nancy, we just done what we figgered we orter," Windy began. "No harm come of it."

"Course not," added Lanky. "Don't give us hell, Nancy."

Fletcher turned very red and grinned, though he was conscious of how near he and his companions had come to taking the life of an innocent man.

After telling them that they were several kinds of fools and that they ought to be fired, the girl whirled, only to turn in the doorway.

"You sure forgot your manners!" she taunted. "Lanky, I suppose you forgot you are the butler at the Bar H, and you, Windy, are the footman!"

"Aw, don't tell him about that," Windy begged. "Honest, we didn't hurt him none!"

"Yeah, Nancy, please don't tell him about that," added Lank. "If you do we'll have to quit our jobs and we can't afford it!"

"Well, quit them!" she retorted. "I wish you would. You are the darndest fools this ranch ever saw! Just stop and think what would have happened if you had hung him! Or shot him like you tried to!"

Though they had been ravenously hungry, the three would-be heroes forgot their hunger and stared at each other after she had departed.

"We sure did play hell!" moaned Fletcher.

"And him a-tellin' us all along he was goin' to clean up the Red Gash outfit!" Lanky added.

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"And it bein' the truth!" wailed Windy. "Durned if I didn't always figger I was a man of judgment. But I dunno, after takin' that jasper for a hoss thief."

When she reached the ranch-house Nancy found the men still talking.

"And ye stole that thar bay hoss right out from under their noses, eh?" cackled old Joe. "While ye was doin' it why didn't ye up and sculp the whul durned outfit, Jim?"

Jim smiled and explained that at the time he had been content to get a horse and saddle, that he had figured seven or more outlaws were too many to deal with then.

Nancy's breath came fast as she listened. Strangely now she did not see a beard-stubbled man in burned and soiled garments, but a tall and courageous hero. She knew this heroism was not imagined. If it were, he would not be here alive. For a moment she mentally compared him with the stupid, flat-faced, boastful George McCracken, and felt weak. Then she was strong again, for she realised that with this man here to wipe out the Red Gash gang, George McCracken would not have a chance in a million of accomplishing this same daring job.

"It sure seems to me you was mighty lucky to get out of that rock gorge alive, Barton," declared John Nesbit. "Not to speak of all the bullets fired in there, wasn't it plenty hot?"

"It was a little warm and the smoke was bad for a time," Jim admitted. Then he saw that the girl was approaching.

"Won't you let Mother and me tend to your burns now?" she begged. "The men can ask you questions later, Mr. Barton."

Jim smiled whimsically down at her, and felt a rush

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of gratitude because he had escaped the Red Gash outlaws and the Bar H cowboys and come here.

"I believe I will," he drawled. "At least it won't hurt me to get a good wash."

They started towards the kitchen where the only hot water supply was to be had, but Nancy turned before they reached the door.

"Dad," she said, "you go over to the bunk-house and see if somebody hasn't some clothes to fit Mr. Barton. His look terrible."

CHAPTER XIX

THE three zealous Bar H cowboys were allowed to eat in peace after Nancy left but they had no sooner reached the bunk-house than they were confronted by the rest of the riders.

"Now you looky here," Windy began defensively. "How was we to know any difference? He was——"

"Sure he was," Rip Jenkins replied soberly. "He was the durndest outlaw a feller ever seen."

"And you three brave buckeroos sure captured him," grinned Jil Ross. "Why didn't you hang him and then tell him aboot it?"

Ed Bridger wiped his tanned face and looked solemn.

"I dunno, but it seems to me a feller orter have a chance to defend his life and——"

"Defend his life?" Lanky exploded. "Say, you should have seen that hombre doin' just that! If you want to know what I think of him, he's a combination of whirlwind and stampede."

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"He strikes me," drawled Bridger, "as a feller with brains in his haid."

"Reel brains," approved Jenkins.

"Which he knows how to use, too," Ross agreed. "Wasn't you three poor calves some scared when you tried to hang him?"

"We was not!" stormed Windy. "Damn it, don't you see we was tryin' to do our duty?"

The baiters looked solemnly at one another.

"Boys," drawled Ross, "did you know them three had a duty?"

"Never did," declared Jenkins.

"Nobody ever seen nothin' of it till to-day," grinned Bridger. "Say, Windy, how's it feel to have one of them there duties?"

"It feels like hell now," Fletcher blurted, and grinned. "Well, we done the best we knew how."

"What stumps me," said Bridger, "is why he didn't shoot these here three valiant and self-appointed officers when he had the chance."

"Aw," put in Pete Errington, "a real man wouldn't do a thing like that. A real man wouldn't nohow shoot these three babes in the woods even if they did tote guns and point 'em at him."

"Yeah, and tell him they was goin' to hang him with a rope, too," drawled Ross.

Jenkins rubbed his chin and looked wise.

"I reckon the reason he let 'em go, boys, was because he figgered they was too innercent to be dangerous. He done one thing that was plumb right though?"

"Yeah," from Bridger, "what was that?"

"Well, it's this away," said Jenkins, "at least this is the way she looks to me. He knowed all along Windy and Frank and Lank wasn't competent to tote guns, so he acts generous and just takes their shootin'-

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irons away from 'em instead of killin' 'em. It was right kind of hem, don't you figure?"

"Right kind," declared Ross.

"Sure shows he was a plumb considerate hombre," agreed Bridger. "Now if he'd shot 'em——"

"We'd had three first-class funerals," chuckled Jenkins. "I always did hate to have to bury three men at a time, 'specially if they was my friends."

"It is awful touchin'," mourned Ross. "One funeral always makes me feel plenty bad, but three——"

"Me, I don't think I could 'a' stood it!" sighed Errington.

"Well, there'd be about half a dozen funerals round here pronto if I had my way!" Windy snorted. "You fools may think it's funny, but it ain't!"

"It ain't, but you three fellers are," Bridger corrected.

"It ain't funny to me!" Lanky swore. "Ain't funny a-tall."

"Say," Ross wanted to know, "did you fellers apologise to him nice after you found you was mistaken?"

"Apologise?" demanded Fletcher. "We ain't had no chance to! We didn't know what he was till we brought him in here and that old man up and told us."

Guffaws and ejaculations followed this explanation.

"Till you brought him in here, huh?" Ross laughed.

"Aw sure," grinned Bridger, "they just led him right in."

"And made him tote their guns 'cause they was too heavy for the poor little waddies," Jenkins added. "I tell you that's the right way to capture outlaws."

"Sure is," Ross approved. "Say, Windy, why don't

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you and Lanky and Frank have that there method patented?"

Several times Windy began voluble explanations to justify his acts and those of his companions, but each time he was cut off by droll and facetious comments. Of the three Windy had perhaps the least genuine courage, but with the others he had risen to heights of valour when there had seemed a chance of capturing a member of the Red Gash outfit.

"Looky here, boys," Bridger addressed Lanky and Fletcher, "did Windy talk much to him?"

"Windy," put in Jenkins, "is not a feller as ever talks much."

"You all go to hell!" Windy exploded. "I talk, but when I do I say somethin', and that's more'n can be said for the rest of you!"

"Well, Windy did whisper a few words to him sort of," Lanky admitted. He was beginning to see a little humour in what they had done, despite its tragic possibilities.

"Yep, and the way Windy takes hold of the situation," began Fletcher.

"I bet he grabbed it like he'd grabbed hold of a steer's tail," said Bridger. "Windy's such an awful man for grabbin'. You mean he just up and took hold like a reel sheriff, don't you?"

The loquacious Windy, who usually told everybody on the outfit what he thought should or should not be done, stood it as long as he could, then angrily bolted from the bunk-house. With him gone, the baiting riders turned to Lanky and Fletcher, and soon made it so uncomfortable for them that they, too, fled into the darkness. After a little search they found Windy perched on top of a corral fence like a surly and irascible old rooster.

"What's wrong?" Lanky drawled. "Gone to roost?"

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"Aw, go hide in a hole!" Windy advised. "I got a notion to quit my job."

"You may have to when the boss gets round to talkin' to you, and us too," said Lanky. "But maybe we'll escape, seein' as how you was sort of ringleader."

"Don't pester him, Lanky," Fletcher suggested. "Maybe he'll crow about daylight."

The chagrin and humiliation of the three were not decreased by the loud laughter that came from the bunk-house.

"Them durned fools!" Windy snorted. "I sure wish they'd been in our places."

"Me, too!" declared Lanky. He knew it would be a long time before they heard the last of their attempt to capture a member of the Red Gash outfit.

He and Fletcher climbed to the fence, one at each side of Windy.

"We'll never live this down," moaned Lanky. "Him a-takin' our guns and makin' us ride in ahead of him right here to this ranch."

"It was sure humiliatin'," sighed Fletcher.

"It was plumb disgracin'!" snorted Windy. "What you fellers say we show this damned outfit up? Everybody here thinks we're a lot of fools, but they'll——"

Fletcher and Lanky wanted to know what he meant. Windy had to hesitate for words, for he was disturbed by the thought that if Jim Barton cleaned out the Red Gash outfit he would be the real hero of Harlan Valley. Windy longed to be a hero himself, and he saw with sickening results how he had barely missed it to-day. If Jim Barton had just been an outlaw instead of a man come to rid the region of outlaws, things would have been different.

Windy was further disturbed by the belief that Jim Barton could cope with the Red Gash gang single-

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handed. Now to lessen his chagrin and to add to his courage and good opinion of himself he suggested that he, Fletcher and Lanky clean the outlaws from Red Gash.

"Us three?" gasped Fletcher, visualising the magnitude of such a job.

"Just us alone?" demanded Lanky.

Windy explained not only how they would accomplish this heroic task, but why. It would require only courage and cunning. Once the job was done, their prestige and reputations would be restored, and more.

Encouraged by the attention and frequent interruptions of his listeners, Windy found that he could again be fluent and eloquent. He discovered, too, that it was easy to talk about capturing or killing every member of the Red Gash outfit.

"But do you think we can do it?" queried Lanky. "There must be seven or eight of them hellions up there."

Fletcher said he was a little in doubt of their ability to cope with so many outlaws.

"Hell!" Windy snorted. "We can just trap 'em in that there valley. Two of us can guard one end and one the other. We'll just starve 'em to death."

"Well," Lanky's enthusiasm was not too great, "we might do that."

Windy said of course they could do it, though he would prefer to capture or kill the outlaws and have it over quickly.

Fletcher remarked that if they succeeded they would have to do a better job than they had done in their effort to bring in a prisoner to the ranch. Windy was ready with a fluent explanation of how they had slipped up on that job merely because they had allowed themselves to be surprised.

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"You can bet your life no man'll surprise me again!" he added. "What happened to-day was the best experience we could've got for this job, boys."

Windy's desire to eliminate the Red Gash gang as a menace was not animated solely by his desire to be a hero and to silence the baiting of the other cowboys. He knew that unless he did something actually heroic he would have to meet the smiles and the taunting lights in Nancy Harlan's dark eyes, and that would not be pleasant.

With his fellows in misery he could now argue convincingly and with many words. The result was that Lanky and Fletcher were soon believing he was at least partly right. One man, Jim Barton, had actually gone into Red Gash, stolen a horse and escaped with his life. Three courageous men should be able to do that and more.

"By golly, I'd like to do it," Lanky declared.

"If we don't do it," said Fletcher, "the other fellers'll be makin' fun of us for the rest of our lives."

"Aw, what do we care if they do make fun of us?" Windy growled, and snapped his fingers to show his contempt and derision. "Now, you two listen to me and I'll show you how this thing can be done. I got it all worked out. That's why I come out here and set on the fence. Them durned fools in the bunkhouse wouldn't give me a chance to think."

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CHAPTER XX

JIM BARTON would let Nancy and her mother do little for his burned hands. He told them meaningly that he wanted his hands unencumbered by bandages.

"But for a day or two at least," Nancy urged as she looked at the many blisters in the broad palm.

"It'd be hard to roll a cigarette with them wrapped up," he grinned.

She wanted to tell him she would roll his cigarettes, but did not. After supper she saw little of him, for he was in conference with her father, Nesbit and Holliday. She could hear them talking earnestly in the shadows of the cottonwoods, but believed she should not be too curious. She already knew that Barton was here for the desperate job of running the outlaws out of Red Gash. The whole ranch knew it, for in the excitement following the arrival of Barton and the three cowboys the secret had come out. It would be a big job, Nancy knew, and she doubted that he would be able to accomplish it, especially since he had already had one harrowing experience with the rustler gang.

In the morning she was surprised when she first saw Jim Barton. He had shaven. His clothes were clean, if none too well fitting. His blond, curly hair seemed to be in constant rebellion against a comb. His smile was candid, even boyish at times, though she noted occasional grim lines in his tanned face. He made no reference to what he had done or intended to do, except to say that he, Nesbit and Holliday were going to the Circle N ranch.

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Not until he had had the opportunity to talk alone with old Joe had he learned that the old plainsman had brought Lije Ford across the San Martins by a roundabout trail.

The previous night before they had climbed from the corral fence, Lanky, Fletcher and Windy had agreed upon the details of their hair-brained scheme to beat Jim Barton to the extermination of the Red Gash outlaws.

This sunny morning, however, they were angered and disappointed because they could not begin immediate execution of their daring, if none too well advised, plan. Joe Gilson detailed them to jobs; Windy to one, Lanky and Fletcher to another.

They knew they could not object without drawing suspicion from the foreman.

They were saddling when they saw Jim coming from the ranch-house, and were thankful that Nancy was not with him. Despite their memory of what they had been forced to undergo yesterday, they had to admit to themselves that he was big, lean, good-looking.

"Now he's goin' to give us hell," Lanky muttered.

"If he does I'll lam him over the head with this quirt!" declared Windy.

Neither by word nor look, however, did Jim allude to the events of the day before. He greeted the cowboys genially and asked a few questions about the range. Presently Nesbit drove up in his buckboard. Holliday was on the seat beside him.

"Scramble in, Jim," the old plainsman ordered fondly. "This'll give yer saddle a chanct to rest."

The three would-be heroes watched the men drive away, wondering why Barton was going to Nesbit's ranch.

"You know," declared Windy, "that jasper don't

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look so hard to me this mornin'. He was so dirty and burnt yesterday was what made him look so durned fierce."

Lanky and Fletcher advised him not to underestimate the man with whom they had already had experience that should have been convincing. They did not have time to argue this point, for they saw Nancy sauntering from the ranch-house. There was a smile on her face.

"Good-morning, boys," she said sweetly. "Do you think you'll be going out after another outlaw to-day?"

Though the cowboys reddened and grinned, they all wished they could tell her where she should go. They said they were going to work. Nancy lifted her dark brows and smiled, and looked a little disappointed.

"Oh, I was hoping you would go out after another outlaw, boys!"

"Aw, Nancy, don't rub it in!" Lanky begged.

Fletcher could only grin and feel foolish.

"Now look here," Windy demanded, "if you'd been in our places—Any feller's bound to make mistakes. Besides that Barton feller looked as mean as a Injun when we run acrost him."

"And," prompted Nancy, "he was riding a horse that had been stolen from this outfit."

Thus encouraged, Windy launched a detailed account of their actions, and convinced himself they had made no mistake in believing Barton an outlaw.

"Of course you three did what you thought was right," the girl said, "but what puzzles me is that you're not going out after a real outlaw to-day."

They looked keenly at her, wondering if she had suspected their plan.

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"Well, if he'd been a real rustler from Red Gash we'd sure brought him in!" declared Lanky.

"You bet!" bragged Frank.

"We'll make this here ranch set up and take notice of us before we're through!" Windy announced. "Where we made our mistake yesterday——"

"Was just in taking the wrong man for an outlaw," Nancy laughed. "Of course as it turned out to be lucky, it wasn't much of a mistake."

The three were grateful when the foreman appeared and gruffly ordered them to get to work. Windy climbed into his saddle and galloped away, angry with himself and everybody else because he had to mend some barbed-wire fence. Lanky and Fletcher were as disconsolate because they had to ride out to brand calves.

As deliberate as he was decisive, Jim Barton was in no hurry to begin his campaign against the rustlers. He was loath to sacrifice human life, and now, since he had met Nancy Harlan, his own life seemed especially valuable. In fact, as Nesbit's horses followed the crooked road through the grass and sage, he was thinking more of the girl than of the desperate task before him. Old Joe, too, had been impressed by Nancy's beauty and sweetness. Now he said:

"That gal of Harlan's is gol-durned purty, men."

"Not so bad looking," Jim admitted impassively.

Nesbit enthusiastically declared Nancy to be the prettiest girl in all the valley that bore her father's name.

"She'll likely be married soon though," he added. "It's said George McCracken is payin' strict court to her."

Jim instantly decided that George McCracken was an enemy.

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"Who's this hyar McCracken, Nesbit?" demanded the old man.

Nesbit explained that George was the son of the San Martin County sheriff. Holliday turned and looked at the young man on the rear seat of the buckboard.

"Huh! Say, you goin' to set down and let that hombre have her, Jim, jest 'cause his paw's the sheriff of this hyar county?"

Jim smiled and shrugged.

"I don't see that it's any of my affair, Mr. Holliday."

"Wal, gol-durn it, if I was yer age I'd make it my affair! Thar's a gal fer ye, Jim Barton. Ye won't see another one in ten thousand like 'er."

Nesbit, who did not like George McCracken any more than he liked his sheriff father, turned to look at Jim. He was disappointed when he again gave his attention to the team.

"I reckon with his kind of work Barton ain't got much time for girls, Holliday," he ventured.

"Shucks!" the old man scoffed. "He kin clean up that Red Gash outfit and still have plenty time for a gal, that is if she's the right gal."

Jim almost wished he had never seen Nancy Harlan, especially if she were going to marry another man. Had he wanted to back down on the job that had brought him into this country, he knew he could not do it. The bullets, the flames, the heat, the deadly rattlesnakes and insects he had defeated in the brushy gorge had left him a debt to the Red Gash outfit he knew he must pay.

It was not yet noon when they reached the Circle N headquarters where they found Elijah Ford guarded by two grim cowboys. The buyer of rustled cattle from across the mountains was sneering, even profane

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when he recognised Jim. Perhaps he had some justification for this savage rage, for, bound to his saddle, he had been led across the mountains after he had been taken from the Vernon jail.

Jim's purpose in coming here, where Ford was to be kept prisoner, was to persuade the cattle buyer to tell all he knew of the Red Gash rustlers. Ford, however, would tell nothing, even about himself, except to insist that he had never bought a single stolen critter.

"You take me back to my own county," he said with an oath, "and I'll prove to you I'm an honest man!"

"Sure he will," agreed old Joe. "He's got plenty friends back thar that's as big liars as he is."

The men glared at each other.

"I orter shot ye on the way hyar, or rolled ye into some canyon!" sneered Holliday. "But ye air too mean and ornery to make good feed fer the buzzards."

"You didn't dare to, Holliday!" Ford accused. "You just wanted to bring me here where I ain't got friends."

"Huh! If ye wanta go where ye got plenty friends, ye orter go to hell, Ford!"

Jim advised the older men that such talk would do them no good.

"Yeah, I know it," growled Holliday, "but I like to tell the varmint what I think of him. Sure told him plenty on the way from Vernon!"

"And I told you a few things, Holliday," Ford retaliated. "If I was in my own county, you men wouldn't dare make me suffer this disgrace and humiliation!"

"Huh!" Joe snorted. "Ye can't disgrace a ornery Injun or make him humiliated! It ain't in him any more'n it is in ye, Ford! Ye're as wuthless as a strip of sp'iled jerky pizened with strychnine!"

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"And at that I'm a gentleman compared with you, Holliday! I wouldn't be seen in your company unless I was forced."

They might have quarrelled indefinitely had not Jim separated them. As he started away with Holliday, Ford called. Jim turned, half hoping that the buyer of stolen cattle was going to confess something of value.

"I want to tell you, Barton, that if you ever show up on the other side of the San Martins you'll be prosecuted for the killin' of Mex Malloy!"

"Tee, hee!" Holliday tittered contemptuously. "Ye can't prosecute a man fer killin' a hyderfoby skunk, Ford. Ye got to think of somethin' a heap better'n that if ye want to scare this young feller. Ye know as good as me that Malloy sure needed killin'."

Jim held no fear of possible disagreeable consequences because of Malloy's death. He still had a warrant to arrest the notorious gunman, and was now really grateful because he would not have to serve it.

His purpose in having Ford brought into San Martin county was to keep him safe until later, when he could be returned to his own county and convicted of buying stolen cattle if this were to be possible. He had already decided that Ford would engage in dishonest business somewhere else if liberated here. The best place to keep him honest was prison.

That there might be no relaxation of the guarding of Ford, Nesbit remained at the Circle N, while Jim drove back towards the Bar H with Joe Holliday beside him. Though he wanted to do much thinking and planning, he had to repeat in detail the story of his experiences in Red Gash, for the old man insisted on it.

"Durned if ye sure ain't a fightin' man, Jim!"

Jim's only agreement was a deprecatory smile and

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shrug. He had things he wanted to consider seriously, for instance the fact that he was in a state where he had really no authority as an officer of the law. Furthermore, the forces of lawlessness were strong here, and even intertwined with the law as it was administered. He felt that under existing conditions he might have more authority if he were a regularly constituted officer here.

It was dusk when they arrived at the Bar H. Jim beheld Nancy dressed in white, with her brown hair looking as though she had devoted considerable time to it. He wondered whether she were really going to marry the son of the San Martin sheriff.

"Miss Harlan," he said, "I'm going to drive to Maguey to-morrow. Would you like to go along?"

Though shy and a little frightened, Nancy was unable to hide her pleasure at this invitation.

"I don't know," she said.

"Better come along, Miss Harlan. I'm just going in to take a look around."

"I don't know," she repeated. "I'll let you know in the morning, Mr. Barton."

After supper, when he was alone under the cottonwoods with Harlan and Holliday, Jim explained his reason for wanting to drive to Maguey.

"You want to go in and have McCracken make you a deputy of San Martin County, eh?" Harlan asked sceptically. He had come to have little faith in the ruddy, heretofore genial sheriff.

Jim told why he thought it best that he be made an officer with legal standing here. He did not want an official inquiry if he had to shoot even an outlaw, since it was apparent that at least some of the county officers were in sympathy, if not actually in collusion with the Red Gash outfit.

"Shucks!" Joe Holliday scoffed. "Boy, ye needn't

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be skeered if ye have to rub out the whul Red Gash gang! They ain't nothin' but a pack of hyderfoby skunks as needs killin', the same as Mex Malloy done over at Vernon."

After some argument, however, Jim was still of the opinion that it would be advisable for him to be made a deputy here. Such action might make it possible for the authority to be taken away from Pat McCracken, who had promised to do so much for the cattle ranchers and actually done so much for the cattle thieves.

CHAPTER XXI

As a token of appreciation and confidence, Harlan had given Jim the bay horse. Jim had appropriated the saddle and bridle he had taken in Red Gash, so he had a good outfit. In the morning Nancy decided she was going to town with him.

"You do the drivin', Barton," Harlan said, "I'll ride on the back seat."

Sitting beside Jim as the mustangs trotted swiftly down the valley road, Nancy could not help comparing him with George McCracken, the man she had promised to marry if he wiped out the Red Gash outlaws.

She now felt small fear that George would make good on that promise. In fact its fulfilment seemed remote indeed. Though she knew little of what Barton was doing or intended to do, she had unlimited faith in his ability. Her one fear was that he would be killed in attempting to do what he had undertaken.

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Neither Jim nor Nancy's father mentioned the campaign against the rustlers. It was as if everything had been settled. Nancy curbed her curiosity as they talked of other subjects.

They had covered fifteen miles and arrived at the small county seat before ten. To Jim the little town with its hills for a background was no unusual sight. Maguey had two brick buildings and a small stone courthouse. Some of its other business houses had square false fronts. There was a generous sprinkling of saloons, and one pool-hall, Kelly's.

In obedience to the rancher's order Jim stopped the team in front of the National Hotel, where they were to get lunch. The hotel adjoined the pool-hall. Harlan climbed to the front seat and had barely left for the livery stable with the team and Jim's led horse which had been brought in in preparation for any eventuality, when George McCracken emerged from the pool-hall wearing a gray flannel suit and with his stiff straw hat perched on the back of his head. He paled, then reddened when he saw Nancy with the tall, bronzed stranger, against whom he instantly felt his own inferiority.

Though she would have preferred to see any one else, Nancy managed to smile.

"Why, hallo, George," she said.

"Hallo, Nancy," he returned, and adjusted his hat. "Didn't know you were to be in town. How are things at the Bar H?"

"Oh, Windy and Lanky are fine," she answered soberly. She felt a quick pleasure when she saw him redden and shift his eyes. "This is Mr. Barton, George," she went on. "Mr. Barton, this is George McCracken, the son of our sheriff."

Though with one good look at the tall stranger

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George had felt hot jealousy, he declared effusively that he was happy to make Barton's acquaintance.

"Glad to meet you, McCracken," Jim drawled as he soberly appraised the sheriff's son. And this was the man rumour said Nancy Harlan would marry!

"Oh, we just decided to come in," Nancy said in reply to George's direct question. "Dad had some business."

George, who had had a few drinks, as usual found it easy to talk.

"This your first visit to Maguey, Barton?" he asked after they had conversed a few minutes. "Mighty fine country."

"First visit," Jim answered. "Yes, it is a fair country."

Most of his attention then was upon the tall, gangling man in jeans and cotton shirt who was angling across the street from the direction of the courthouse. The man wore a broad black sombrero on his head and a pistol and cartridge-belt about his lean waist. Jim touched Nancy's arm.

"Pardon me, Miss Harlan," he interrupted, "but do you know that man comin' across the street?"

Nancy turned quickly and was relieved at once, for she had thought that perhaps he was asking about one of the Red Gash outlaws who might have ridden into town.

"Why, that's Buck Layton, Mr. Barton!"

"Yeah, that's Layton," declared George. "Buck's my father's head deputy. He's not such a hot officer, but I reckon he's the best to be had here. Say, I'll introduce you to Buck, Barton, if you want to." He was grateful for this opportunity. It would show that he was a personage of some importance here. Too, if Barton and the deputy were to get into conversation,

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perhaps he could have Nancy's undivided attention.

"Wait a minute, Buck," he commanded officiously. "Here's a man I want you to meet. Stranger here, just rode in from the Bar H."

Instead of slowing down, Layton marched straight towards the tall young man on the sidewalk, though he did turn his head to grin drolly at Nancy.

The girl, however, was feeling like doing anything but grinning, for the lanky under-sheriff had gripped the handle of his six-shooter and Jim Barton's right hand was lingering menacingly near his own weapon.

"W-w-why, what's the matter?" George suddenly faltered. "You—you two——"

There was apparently deadly menace and hostility in the eyes of both men. Nancy flinched and drew back a little. She felt stiff and cold. Why was Buck Layton acting this way? And why was Jim Barton?

George McCracken's face was pasty. He licked his lips and looked about. Only a few other men were in sight, and not one seemed to be seeing the making of tragedy. George wanted to run, to yell for help, but fear and expectation kept him silent. He stared first at Layton, then at Jim Barton. Buck was now crouched forward. He was snarling so that one end of his long sandy moustache was lifted.

"Why, you low-down greaser! What you a-doin' here? Say, you orter been hung for horse-stealin' years ago! This here town's been disgraced before, but never like it's bein' disgraced now! Say, who let you out of jail?"

Pale and staring now, Nancy wanted to believe that the deputy was drunk or that he had mistaken Jim for somebody else. She saw Jim tensed for immediate action. His smile was grim, contemptuous. He had hold of the handle of his six-shooter now.

"Shut up!" he snarled. "You lousy Injun, you talk

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to me like that and I'll put a hole in you a man can ride a horse through!"

"Yeah, you will, will you?" Buck took a step and lifted his Colt half-way from its holster. "I been waitin' for two years just for a chance to kill you, Barton!"

Nancy gasped, wanted to cry out. This was not mistaken identity after all. Buck Layton was not drunk. She reached out as if to clutch something that would avert this impending tragedy, and felt her hand clasped frantically. Though she knew her hand was feverishly held by McCracken's, she was too intent on what was directly before her eyes to draw the hand away.

"So you've been waitin' two years to shoot me, eh?" Jim drawled as his squinted blue eyes held squarely on those of the other man. "Then go ahead and draw, Buck Layton!"

Nancy only slightly felt the swift, imploring pressure of young McCracken's hand as if in command for her to interfere.

"Men!" she cried. "Don't! Don't do this!"

"You keep outa this, woman!" Buck sneered. "I been waitin' a long time to kill this horse thief, and now I got him——"

"Pull your hardware!" commanded Jim, and lifted his own weapon part way from its holster. "I've been honin' for this chance, Layton!"

Then Nancy could not cry out, and McCracken was as inarticulate as if he were wooden. The two men had jerked their pistols. Instead of firing at the distance of six feet, however, as if by mutual understanding they twirled the big weapons on their forefingers and flipped them to their left hands. Their rights gripped.

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"Howdy, Buck," Jim drawled. "Why, you old maverick, I didn't know you'd got out of jail!"

"By golly, Jim!" Buck muttered. "Where'd you come from? Which jail did you get out of last? What the hell you doin' in this town, anyway?"

They slapped each other upon back and shoulder, pushed each other joyously about, gripped hands again.

"Wal, how are you, Jim?"

"Bueno! Hanged if I'm not mighty pleased to see you again, Buck. Didn't you like the last jail?"

"Sure, the last jail was fine," Buck laughed. "Sorry I had to leave it."

Only now did George realise that all the threat and menace had been horseplay. He felt anything but comfortable. As for Nancy, she was weak with relief, though more than a little angry. Why had these two frightened her so?"

"You two idiots!" she accused, then checked her berating suddenly with the thought that possibly this show had been staged not for her and George, but for George alone. She turned. "Why, George, you aren't scared, are you?"

"Huh? Me? Scared?" George stammered as he tried to laugh. "Of course I wasn't, but——"

Nancy's lip curled as she turned away from him, for he looked as if he had been frightened out of years of his life.

"Naw, Georgie ain't scared," Buck drawled solemnly. "Georgie, he never gets scared."

McCracken reddened with futile rage while he wished he had a gun. He wished, too, that he could run, or that he had not been here at all.

"Well, I did expect you to open up on each other," he confessed shakily. "How was I to know if——"

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To add to his discomfiture he was paid no more attention by Jim Barton than if he had not been here to witness this frontier meeting. Nancy was now managing to smile.

"And you two are old friends?" she demanded.

"Sure," Jim laughed. "I've known the homely horse thief for years, Miss Barton. I'm sorry if we frightened you, but I wanted him to see he doesn't run any rannykeboo on me."

"Sure," drawled Buck. "I used to punch cattle for his pappy back in Taixas. Did we scare you, Nance?"

"Of course you scared me! You scared me out of a year's growth, Buck Layton!"

"Aw, now, don't you go blamin' me for all of it, Nance. I wasn't to blame for more'n half of it. Him, he never was no-account, and I know it!"

"I'll own up to my half of the blame, Miss Harlan," Jim grinned, "but I was glad to see the old maverick. Surprised, too."

Nancy was beginning to see humour in what had been done. She saw more when she turned quickly.

"Why, George is gone!" she gasped.

Jim found it hard to hide a smile, for he had seen George duck hurriedly into the pool-hall. Buck was now gazing soberly around like a much puzzled owl with a long sandy moustache and a long, droll face.

"Wal, Georgie is gone!" he muttered. "I wonder if he run for the sheriff or to get his own gun?"

Nancy laughed now. She knew that no matter what happened, she could never marry George McCracken. She had doubted his courage, now she knew he had none at all.

Jim, too, was feeling happy, for he realised that if he had a rival in George at all, he was a rival of little mettle.

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"Wal, now, Nance," Buck said, "if we skeered you I'm powerful sorry, but I just had to tell this mangy critter what I thought of him."

"Oh, you didn't scare me!" Nancy declared. "You just about frightened me to death. Honestly, I expected to see you kill each other!"

Jim smiled, and laid an arm about the deputy's shoulders.

"Miss Harlan," he said, "there will never be any danger of us shooting each other. I'll tell Buck to his face he is one of the squarest hombres in all the South-west."

"Except you," Buck qualified. "Say, Nance, I knowed him since he was a kid, and I never knowed him to do anything worse'n steal horses and rob widders and orphings. Yep, he's one square hombre. Leave the old folks well, Jim?"

Nancy, as she saw the respect and warm friendship of these two men, marvelled that only a few minutes before she had seen them with drawn guns and had expected them to blast each other into eternity.

Buck was now looking at her so intently that the colour crept to her face. Then he glanced out of the tail of an eye at the tall, tanned young man at his side.

"She is sort of a purty gal, ain't she, Jim?" he drawled. "Figger you like her?"

Jim reddened, but his embarrassment was pink compared with the blush that swept up from the girl's rounded throat. Jim, for once, found no ready words.

"Why, Buck Layton!" cried Nancy.

"Haw, haw, haw!" laughed Buck, unabashed. "That skeered you, didn't it? Skeered you both!"

Nancy felt as if she had never been as glad of anything in her life as she was glad for the sight of her

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own father approaching from the direction of the livery stable.

"Dad!" she cried, and felt her face cool a little. "Buck and Mr. Barton have known each other for years. Buck used to punch cows for Mr. Barton's father back in Texas."

The rancher looked at the men in surprise, then at his rosy daughter.

"You don't say so?" he chuckled. "This is good news."

"Wal, maybe it is," Buck drawled, "but a while ago it wasn't. This here horse-stealin' maverick come durned nigh to shootin' me, Tom."

Jim took no part in explaining the simulated nearness to deadly gunplay. Tom Harlan chuckled as he listened. He looked fondly at his daughter.

"They scared you, eh, Nancy?"

"Naw, we didn't do that," Buck drawled. "The only feller round here as was honest skeered was Georgie McCracken."

"George McCracken?" demanded the rancher as he looked about angrily. "Where is he now?"

"Aw," replied Buck, "I reckon Georgie done vamosed. Likely he's gone to fetch the undertaker, Tom."

Though he neither liked nor trusted young McCracken, the rancher did not smile as he listened to Buck's droll account of how George had looked and acted.

"I think," he said presently, "that we'd likely best be goin' to the courthouse to arrange that business, Barton. Nance, will we find you here at the hotel when we're ready for dinner?"

She said she would wander about town until dinnertime, as she had a few purchases to make.

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"I hope you will pardon Buck and me for our horse-play, Miss Harlan," Jim said.

She did not tell him he had already been pardoned. It would be better to leave him in a little doubt, that is if he had any serious thoughts about her.

"Reckon I'll amble along, too," Buck said. "I wanta interduce this here ornery Injun to my boss."

CHAPTER XXII

GEORGE MCCRACKEN was insanely angry with himself because of the abject cowardice he had shown. He had reasoned now that he should have known that Layton and the newcomer had staged their frontier show for his benefit. He hated them both savagely.

He fled through the pool-hall to the back yard. As he hurried on he managed to regain some of his composure. He saw that he must re-establish himself as the hero in his own mind before he could hope to win Nancy.

George was in his father's office when Harlan, Buck and Jim Barton entered. In the presence of the sheriff George could feel a little confident, more than a little insolent. Neither Buck nor Jim indicated they had witnessed cowardice and precipitous flight.

"Why, hallo, Tom," the sheriff said with forced geniality. He scrambled up to take the rancher's hand. "Glad to see you lookin' so well, Tom."

"Could feel a lot worse," Harlan returned. Long since he had learned the hypocrisy of the sheriff's cordiality.

Jim was introduced by the rancher, while Buck

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stood with droll impassivity. The sheriff declared he was more than pleased to meet a friend of Harlan's.

"I can't exactly call him a friend yet," Harlan corrected. "I only knowed him a few days. Buck there——"

McCracken seemed puzzled and displeased as he looked from the deputy to Jim Barton.

"Yeah," drawled Buck, "I knowed the son of a gun back in Taixas. He ain't no account, though."

This lack of recommendation did not fool the sheriff. He knew that under certain conditions Buck was likely to say exactly what he did not mean.

"Well, Barton," laughed McCracken, "if you're a friend of Buck's, that's enough for me."

"Aw," snorted Buck, "he ain't no friend of mine! He's a low-down orejano, and I don't know what good he expects to do here in this country, Pat."

"Likely as much good as you've done in it, Buck," the sheriff chuckled. He asked his visitors to sit down.

George picked up a newspaper and leaned nonchalantly against the big safe. It would not do to let these fools believe he was frightened here, or even interested in what they were saying. As he made as if to scan the paper his left hand crept back and found the combination knob of the safe. He turned it slowly as he tried to hear the small click and listen to what the other men were saying at the same time.

George gasped and raised the paper to hide his sudden pallor when he heard the rancher say he wanted Jim made a deputy sheriff. Though not as as startled as his son, the sheriff was as much displeased, yet he knew he dared not refuse lest he strengthen the suspicion that he was in league with the Red Gash rustlers.

"Had any experience as a peace officer, Barton?" he inquired, trying to be shrewd.

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"A little," Jim answered.

"It's this way, Pat," Harlan put in. "I talked the matter over with John Nesbit. Him and me agreed we had the right to have a deputy up in the valley. There's been some minor cattle stealin', and we want to put an end to it before it goes too far."

"Why—yes, I believe you're right, Tom," the sheriff admitted, though against his own desire. "It's hard for me or Buck to be up the valley much of the time. Yeah, I reckon if you say so I can make Barton a special deputy. The county hasn't got any money to pay him, though."

Harlan said that he and the owner of the Circle N would pay the deputy. They wanted to stop the stealing of their cattle.

Listening intently, George heard more than was actually being said, and he soon began to believe this tall, quiet newcomer with the curly blond hair and clear blue eyes was here to run the rustlers out of Red Gash.

George's craven action when he had thought deadly gunplay was but the matter of a split-second had but momentarily lessened his good opinion of himself. Now like a blow in the face he was smitten with the recollection that Nancy Harlan had promised to marry him only if he would rid the mountain rendezvous of its outlaws. He laid the newspaper on top of the safe, looked bored.

"Well," he drawled, "I guess I'll ramble round some."

"Sure, go ahead," Buck encouraged, "but don't get lost, Georgie."

George sauntered out, wishing he had the courage to kill the stranger and the man who persisted in calling him Georgie. What he feared most at the moment

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was that the droll Buck would tell the story of what had happened at the hotel.

"The ——, he'll think it's a joke!"

George hoped to find Nancy so that he might explain why he had departed so suddenly. He would assure her he had been unarmed, so of course could not have interfered in the threatened gunplay. He wondered whether she would believe him.

"Damn the luck!" he swore. "I wish that Barton hadn't showed up."

He stopped in the little plaza, rolled a cigarette, all the time conscious that if he were to hold Nancy to her promise he would have to act promptly and heroically.

"I'll do it!" he vowed to himself, and felt more courage. "I'll get those rustlers out of Red Gash! And I'll do it before that Barton can get started, if that's what he's here for!"

Pat McCracken harboured no delusions as to why the ranchers wanted a special deputy, though Harlan made no mention of the Red Gash outfit. McCracken felt thwarted, frustrated, yet he dared not refuse.

He glanced at the safe. If it had twice as much money in it as it held now, he would not care what the ranchers did. He would even encourage them to form a posse of fighting cowboys to annihilate the rustlers.

He was not without hope, however, for it was barely possible the newcomer was going to tackle this desperate job alone. Still, he might be planning to lead a posse from the ranches. McCracken decided he had best not be too inquisitive. He would have been far more concerned had he suspected that Lije Ford was a prisoner at the Circle N.

"Reckon we'd better be goin', Barton," Harlan

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suggested. "There don't seem to be any more use of us botherin' the sheriff, now you got your star."

"Bother?" laughed McCracken. "No bother at all. Mighty glad you come in, Tom. How are things runnin' at the Bar H?"

"Nothin' to be greatly complained about," returned the rancher.

Presently he and Jim went out. Buck would have accompanied them had not his superior asked him to stay.

"What do you know about that Barton?" McCracken asked.

"Aw, he ain't much, just common," drawled Buck with long face and inscrutable voice, like an Indian who does not want to tell what he knows.

"Is he a gunfighter?"

Buck widened his eyes, dropped his lower jaw.

"Him a gunfighter?"

"Yes, is Barton a gunfighter?" persisted the sheriff. though Buck's disdain of the idea encouraged him.

Buck sat down and told at some length about his friendship with Jim in Texas.

"He was just a ordinary kid, Pat," he elaborated. "I was s'prised as hell to see him here."

Though he knew that Jim Barton had been a Texas ranger for three years, Buck did not consider it necessary to mention this fact. "He won't stay here long, Pat. He's one of them wanderin' cusses. Besides, his old man's got plenty dinero. He don't have to settle down."

McCracken's mind was less troubled when Buck left. After all, there might remain a chance of getting additional fat "dividends" from the Red Gash outfit. He would have to contact Jack Littrell as soon as possible. For a few minutes he considered sending his son as messenger to Red Gash.

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"No, that wouldn't work. George'd be scared to death." Dishonest as he was himself, McCracken always felt shamed when he thought about the actual courage his son possessed. "Well, maybe Littrell or one of his men'll ride in."

When they were in the plaza Harlan asked Jim what he thought of the sheriff.

"Well," Jim drawled, "I doubt that he'd do to ride the river with."

"You suspect him of crookedness?"

"I wouldn't trust him myself, sir, He's too damned cordial and—well, oily, I reckon."

The rancher said he had come to believe the people of San Martin County had made a mistake in electing the sheriff.

"Likely they did," Jim agreed. "I believe I'll stay in town to-night and take a better look at him."

Harlan was disappointed, for he had wanted Jim to return to the ranch and begin his campaign against the rustlers.

"You figure that's the best thing to do, Barton?"

"Yes," said Jim," I'd like to have a little more time to size up McCracken. Besides, I want to talk over old times with Buck. A day or so won't really matter, Mr. Harlan."

"No, I reckon not," agreed the rancher. "You look the sheriff over, but we'd like to see you at the ranch to-morrow."

They found Nancy waiting in the little hotel lobby.

"We'll go in to dinner," said her father.

Nancy found it impossible to hide her disappointment when she learned that Jim was not to return to the ranch with her and her father.

"He'll be out to-morrow," Harlan explained. "He wants to visit with Buck to-night."

"Oh Then you'll be out to-morrow, Mr. Barton?"

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"Unless some son of a gun actually takes a shot at me," Jim smiled.

Nancy had been schooled to reticence, but when she and her father started for the ranch she found she could no longer curb her curiosity. Ever since she had first seen Jim Barton she had felt a mounting fear that he alone would try to perform a very desperate task, and that he might not succeed. A score of times she had pictured him as he had been trapped in the black gorge and threatened with bullets, rattlesnakes and fire. She had shuddered at these pictures.

"Dad, is he going to try to do it alone?"

"You mean Barton?"

"Yes."

He said that final plans had not been agreed upon, and advised her not to worry her pretty head thinking about them.

"But if he tackles it alone he may be killed," Nancy protested.

"Well, any man who tackles a risky job knows he takes a chance," the rancher said practically.

"But if he is killed, you and Mr. Nesbit will be responsible, Dad. You had him come."

Harlan pondered this. He was indeed troubled because Jim Barton had insisted on acting alone against the Red Gash gang, at least to the point where he might find out whether or not he needed help. Harlan turned to look keenly at his daughter.

"You like this Barton, Nancy?"

"Like him? Why, Dad, I haven't known him long enough to know whether I do or not. What made you think of that?"

"Oh, nothin' in particular," he answered, "only likely I was hopin' you'd like him better than you like George McCracken, girl."

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"Like George? I hate him! Why, Dad, I hate the very ground he walks on, the fool!"

"Then you ain't thinkin' serious of marryin' George, eh, Nancy?"

"Marrying him? Dad, to-day there in the street he was scared stiff! He's just a white-livered coward! I'd just as soon marry an Injun as a coward!"

Though it took more courage than he normally owned, and more intelligence, too, George McCracken had decided on what he must do to strike the first blow at the Red Gash outfit. It must be a blow in which he himself would run little risk of death or injury.

He fed his horse well, for he had a long, hard ride to make. Next he oiled and re-loaded the two forty-fours he occasionally wore about town. He filled the cartridge belt and did a few other things he considered necessary. He did not go down town, for he feared that Buck Layton and Jim Barton had told the story of the show they had staged.

"Damn that Barton!" George muttered as he lay on his bed, to wait for supper and then darkness. "I wish he hadn't showed up! I'll beat him yet though!"

As for Jim and Buck, they were thinking very little about George. Neither of them had any desire to tell the sheriff or any one else for that matter, how George had behaved in the face of what he had expected to be violent death to at least one man that morning.

They visited a few saloons where Buck solemnly introduced his friend as the meanest and most worthless man who had ever come out of Texas. After they had eaten supper at a Mexican "chili house" they went to the sheriff's office where Buck was supposed to be in charge for a few hours each evening. Here they went on with their talking.

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From the dense shadow of a catalpa tree in the plaza, George McCracken watched with mounting anger and impatience. It was after nine when he saw the light go out in the office. He waited until he saw two men emerge from the building and start across the dark street.

A few minutes later he slipped into his father's office through the rear doorway. He had been here so many times that he did not need a light. Nor did he require a light to work the combination of the safe. He had already learned that by placing his ear against the iron door he could hear the drop of the tumblers as he slowly turned the combination knob.

It took but a minute for him to get to the point where all he had to do was twist the handle of the safe and drag open the heavy door.

Previous exploration had showed him the places where banknotes and gold were kept. He hurriedly stuffed his pockets full of money, listened. Forgetting even to close the door of the safe, he tiptoed out of the dark office and hurried towards his horse which he had left at the southerly edge of town.

CHAPTER XXIII

LITTRELL had been doing much hard thinking. He had tried to consider the situation from all possible angles. Ford's disappearance and the death of Malloy, coupled with the escape of Jim Barton from the gorge, had given him cause for troubled thoughts.

These things, however, did not persuade him that he and his men should desert Red Gash Valley until

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they had wrenched more unlawful money from their work here. At the middle of the sunny afternoon he summoned his men to the front of the cabin.

The outlaw leader paced nervously to and fro as if reluctant to reveal his plans until he had had time to refine them to the last detail. Five of the rustlers were expectant. Antrim waited, surly and uninterested. As usual Chico was on guard at the lower end of the valley.

"Here's the way she looks to me," Littrell said as he faced his men. "The bank job looks good, but our best bet is that Harlan girl."

Kirkup and Ritter yipped their approval of this savage statement. Antrim's face darkened a little more than usual. Littrell went on to explain that the kidnapping of the girl involved little risk except in the actual abduction. Once she was here in the valley no one would dare attack in the fear that she would be killed or harmed.

"Yeah, and what's a hell of a sight more," spoke up Ritter, "once we get her, her old man'll dig up plenty dinero to get her back."

"Yeah," Kirkup added, "and he's got plenty, if what we heard in town is true!"

One after another Littrell asked the outlaws what they thought of the plan, though he actually cared little for their opinions except that harmony often helped in a hard fight or risky adventure. Five gave immediate approval.

"Wal, what you think of it, Black?" Littrell demanded.

"I told you what I think of gal stealin'!" retorted Antrim. "It's mean, low-down business. I'll rob a bank or stage a hold-up or tussle with a cow as quick as any feller, but damned if I'll take part in kidnappin' a woman!"

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Because the others knew the deadly enmity between Antrim and the leader, they refrained from taunting him about his "chicken-heartedness." Littrell smiled coldly, and shrugged.

"You'll get your belly full of bank-robbin', Black."

"Suits me. If I'm goin' to commit crimes, I want to commit crimes I ain't ashamed of."

Ritter, Nashwilder and Kirkup were detailed to steal the girl, or at least to make a reconnaissance preparatory to the theft. They were to approach the Bar H headquarters, and if they found it deserted by the majority of the cowboys, as likely it would be during the middle of the day, they were to ride in and take Nancy.

"I ain't expectin' you three to get her the first day unless the road's open," Littrell explained. "You three decide on what's best to do. I'd ride along with you, but I figure somebody ought to be here in case of a raid. Damn that Barton, I sure wish we hadn't let him get out of the gorge alive!"

The three were told they should leave before daylight the following morning. They were to take no useless risks, but to get the girl if this seemed feasible. At least they could return with information as to how to kidnap her, if they could not bring her this first time. As detailed discussion was begun, Antrim slouched away.

"Black, he sure don't like the idea of gal-stealin'," Ritter sneered.

"Aw, the ——!" snarled Littrell. "Reckon I'll have to have a showdown with him some day."

When Nancy and her father reached the Bar H at dusk, she saw Windy, Lanky and Fletcher squatting on their heels with their backs against the horse trough some distance from the bunk-house. She could

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not resist the opportunity to tell them how George McCracken had acted in town.

The three cowboys, however, were not eager to see her. They had decided they would not risk being put on separate jobs to-morrow, but would head for Red Gash without awaiting orders from Joe Gilson.

"Aw, what's she comin' over here for?" Windy complained. "She ain't got no business with us. Never did see a girl as had any brains."

"Aw, she just wants to make fun of us," Lanky muttered sourly.

"Well, we can't kick her in the seat of the britches 'cause she's the boss's daughter," Fletcher accepted with reluctant philosophy. "She's grinnin', and that means we're goin' to ketch it."

"Hallo, boys!" Nancy called. "Why are you so exclusive?"

"We ain't," Windy denied.

"We're jest talkin'," Lanky explained.

They were much pleased but a little disappointed when she did not tell them what brave outlaw-capturers they were. They were in no mood for humour, however, so they refrained from laughing when she told how George had acted when he had thought Jim Barton and the under-sheriff were going to kill each other.

"Aw, that George McCracken," Windy sneered, "you didn't expect nothin' else of him, did you, Nancy? He's as white-livered as a buzzard!"

"Likely he was scared," Lanky remarked as if not interested at all.

"Of course he was scared," Nancy went on. "I was scared to death myself. They did it so real, boys. You know how mean Buck Layton can look when he wants to? Well, Jim Barton looked almost as mean. I tell you I was scared stiff for a minute or so."

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"Huh! That durned Barton!" Windy commented sardonically. "He always looks mean to me. I don't like that jasper."

"Of course you don't," retorted Nancy. "You know what a bold and desperate outlaw he is, Windy."

"I know he could have kept from makin' durned fools out of us!" Windy declared righteously. "He could have explained so we'd believed him."

"He didn't give us a fair deal," Lanky added less forcibly.

The cowboys had risen at her approach. Now their looks and restlessness tried to show her they would be pleased if she made her visit short.

"What is wrong with you boys?" she demanded. "You all look so serious! Or are you sick?"

"Aw, we just come out here to take a smoke and guess what we're goin' to do to-morrow," Windy explained. "You had any supper, Nancy?"

She tilted her dark head to one side and smiled.

"Are you inviting me to go?"

"'Course we ain't," denied Lanky. "Set down and have a smoke."

"You know I don't smoke!"

"Then set down," Lanky invited. "There's lots of ground."

"And little politeness here," she retorted. "I believe I'll go get some supper."

Much to their pleasure, she turned and started towards the ranch-house.

"Now you be good boys," she flung over her shoulder. "I don't want to hear of you capturing any more bad outlaws."

"Knowed she'd have to throw that up to us," Windy raved as the girl swung gracefully towards the house. "Well, she'll——"

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"Sing another tune before many days," finished Lanky.

"You bet!" agreed Fletcher.

Nancy's visit made them more determined than before to redeem what they called their reputations. As soon as darkness came they began their actual preparations, smuggling weapons and ammunition from the bunk-house, and getting food from the cook-house.

Two hours before daylight they were saddling their horses. They rode a half-circle so they would rouse nobody, and thus gained the northerly side of the valley.

"Durned if we care if they find we're missin'," growled Windy when day came and they were in the broken mesa country that reached to the base of the San Martin mountains.

"Let 'em find us missin'," agreed Fletcher. He was now thoroughly imbued with the plan for bringing back the Red Gash outlaws dead or alive.

"If we don't fetch 'em in," swore Lanky, "I'm goin' to leave my bones in them mountains yonder."

Windy and Fletcher declared they were as desperately determined.

"No —— of a lone rider's goin' to fool me this time," Windy bragged loudly. "If he don't look right the next time I see him I'm goin' to drill him and talk to him later. I'm not sure yet that feller ain't a rustler or all-round outlaw himself."

The others argued that they believed Jim Barton to be what he claimed, but Windy was hard to convince. He swore and shook his head.

"I ain't trustin' that hombre full! Not by a long shot. Likely when we fetch in what's left of the Red Gash gang some of 'em'll identify this here four-flusher."

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They munched cold food as they rode, for they did not want to lose time. They complained, however, that they wanted hot coffee and hot flapjacks with plenty of molasses.

"Say, there's that little pass where that feller fooled us." Fletcher reminded without pleasure.

"Aw, him!" Windy snorted so violently that he blew out a mouthful of bread and cold meat. "Say, it'd be just like Nancy to up and marry him. You never can tell what a fool girl'll do. I ain't got no use for women!"

The events in Vernon and the escape of Jim Barton from the fiery gorge had made the outlaws agree that it would be wise to guard the lower portal of Red Gash Valley day and night to be comparatively safe from surprise attack. This crisp morning, while the rugged mountains were still bathed only in starlight, Chico and Ritter came down the valley. Behind them were Nashwilder and Kirkup. Chico was to relieve Draper, who had stood night guard in the slide of huge boulders that had broken from the westerly wall where the valley narrowed to a canyon.

Shivering, Chico found a "soft place" among the rocks, and Draper, after talking for a few minutes with the would-be kidnappers, headed for the cabin to get some breakfast and sleep.

Ritter, Kirkup and Nashwilder let their horses pick the way along the rocky trail out of the canyon, and were soon headed across the dark range towards Harlan Valley. They rode as fast as they could during the short period of darkness that remained. After day came they would be cautious, for they did not intend to be surprised by any cowboys who might be riding in this direction.

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Though George McCracken had never been twenty miles from Maguey along the foothills of the San Martins, he knew approximately the location of Red Gash Valley. He knew that by skirting the foothills he would eventually come to Red Gash Creek, and that he could ride up it to the valley.

Though George did not relish the miles in the saddle, which to him meant hard work, he was now so desperately determined to thwart Jim Barton and win Nancy that he rode doggedly and fast where the footing would allow.

When George had looked from afar at the San Martins, they had seemed safe enough, and grand. Now as he saw them rising rugged and star-lined at his left he felt their loneliness, their grimness, their wildness. He was heartened, however, by his own daring bravery and the thought of his plan for dealing with the outlaws, which he considered novel and very clever.

George's course and timing were such that they took him back of Ritter, Kirkup and Nashwilder after they had left Red Gash Valley. Day was breaking when he reined in at the top of a rocky mesa and looked down at a narrow flat where a creek brawled.

At his left, half a mile away, was a huge slide of rock that had broken from the reddish sandstone wall. Beyond this were the still dark floor and the dark, precipitous walls of the outlaw hangout.

For the first time George began to wonder whether he had been wise. If what he had heard were true, he could not be more than a mile from where Jack Littrell and his outlaws had their home. The sun was beginning to brighten the easterly horizon when George conquered his qualms, found the rocky trail and headed down it.

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CHAPTER XXIV

Buck Layton, who had formed the habit of rising early in his cowboy days, usually opened the sheriff's office. The night before, however, he and Jim Barton had had rather a good time, and had talked much about people and ranges back in Texas, so Buck had slept late. It was the sheriff who grasped the knob this morning and brusquely attempted to push the office door open. The door was locked with its snap catch.

"I wonder what's wrong with Layton?" Pat McCracken asked himself as he fished for his key ring.

As the sheriff entered he looked about, displeased because his deputy was not here. Then, his thoughts on his money, he looked towards the safe. Its door was partly open.

"What the hell!" he ejaculated.

For a full minute he stood rigid, staring at the open door, wondering whether he himself had failed to lock it. No, he remembered he had locked the safe last night. He never failed to lock it.

Actually sick with fear, he rushed to the safe, dragged the heavy door completely open. He dropped to his knees. One look assured him that all official papers were in their places. Another told him his money was gone.

It was hard for McCracken to realise that he was penniless.

"I wonder if some of that damned Red Gash outfit slipped in here last night?" he asked himself, and felt hurt at heart. "If they did, they're an ungrateful pack of coyotes!"

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Then with full realisation, he became frantic, searching the small compartments of the safe with big, rough hands. The disaster was complete. He sank back to his boot-heels and groaned. He had lost the illicit money with which he had hoped to establish himself in respectable security.

Then he was seized with a terrible rage. He scrambled to his feet and stood glaring about. His ruddy face was now mottled with pallor. It could not be possible that Littrell or any of his men had done this thing! They were his friends!

"Why—I'd—I'd have trusted Jack Littrell anywhere," the sheriff muttered.

Striding to and fro, he put the men of Red Gash out of mind temporarily as suspects, and began to enumerate the people who could have done this, the disreputable characters about town. He swore he would have his money back or kill the man who had stolen it. He was gripped by the fear that if the news of his loss ever became public he would be asked to explain how he had got so many thousands of dollars.

"I wonder if Buck Layton——" Then he quickly eliminated the lanky deputy from the list of suspects. "No, Buck's dead straight."

For a few minutes he poignantly wished that he himself were as honest as Layton. Then avarice again got the upper hand, and he searched his brain anew for the identity of the thief. Suddenly he tensed, and a cold smile spread over his fat face.

"I've got it! It's that Barton! He was here long enough to get the lay of the place yesterday! That's it! That's why he wanted to be deputised!"

It was all clear now, though somewhat complicated. Perhaps Barton had merely been hired to perpetrate the robbery, with Harlan and Nesbit as the brains

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behind it. Savage though he was, McCracken shook his head in troubled perplexity.

"I wonder if they could have known I was gettin' a cut from the Red Gash outfit? I wonder if they took this way of gettin' their money back!"

The sheriff was sick with the injustice of this sneaking treachery. Nesbit and Harlan had no right to steal his money, though it was lawfully their own. He was the sheriff of San Martin. He had worked hard, schemed, risked life and honour to get that wealth. Now it was gone! He paced slowly now, mentally cursing the ranchers, the safe, Jim Barton. He stopped, tensed as he heard steps outside. He jerked open the drawer of the table he used as desk, grabbed a six-shooter and rammed it inside his waistband against his paunch.

The door opened and Buck Layton slouched in. The sheriff glared at him.

"Who the hell robbed that safe, Layton?"

Never a man easily surprised, Buck was not surprised at all now. He merely looked a little blank.

"Huh? Safe been robbed?" he drawled. "Who done it, Pat?"

"Who done it?" McCracken snarled. "I'm askin' you who done it!"

"And," Buck drawled in the same tone he had used before, "I'm askin' you who done it."

The men looked hard at each other for a half-minute. The sheriff's eyes were hot and accusing, the deputy's cold and quizzical. Then with unexpected swiftness Buck strode forward. His right hand reached out and grabbed the Colt from McCracken's waistband.

"Here! Gimme that gun!" the sheriff commanded, and started to lunge for the weapon.

"Aw, go to hell," Buck ordered with deadly calm.

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"The way you're feelin' now, you're likely to shoot somebody and be sorry for it." He rammed the Colt against his concave belly and smiled without mirth. "Now I reckon you can tell me about this here robbery."

McCracken lunged to the safe, hauled open the door.

"See for yourself! Every damned cent except a little silver is gone!"

Buck never had had access to the safe, in fact he had never as much as speculated over the intricacies of the combination. He had suspected, however, that the sheriff kept a lot of money locked up.

"I reckon if you say so it's true," he remarked. "Who done it?"

"Who done it? Who done it?" McCracken was almost incoherent with rage and frustration. "I'll tell you who done it! It was that damned friend of yours, Layton! That's who done it! And you're as guilty as he is!"

As understanding came, the droll passivity fled from Buck's weathered face. One end of his sandy moustache drew up. His teeth gleamed. With a movement almost too swift for the enraged eyes of the sheriff to follow, Buck drew his own gun.

"You dirty, lyin', stealin' hound!" he sneered as he jammed the end of the six-shooter against McCracken's paunch. "You a-sayin' Jim Barton robbed that safe?"

"Sure I'm sayin' it!" McCracken blustered, though his heavy face was now mottled with fright. "Who else could have done it? 'Course he was told to do it by Nesbit and Tom Harlan!"

The sheriff made as if to grasp the gun and wrench it away, but let his hands drop jerkily to his sides as he read the meaning in the deputy's squinted eyes. Buck twisted the weapon.

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"Now listen to me, you big fat, stealin' polecat! Am I right in believin' you say Jim Barton robbed your damned safe, or is my hearin' off a little?"

"Hell!" McCracken protested. "Who else could have done it? He got himself appointed as my deputy, damn him! You know the safe ain't never been robbed before, Buck!"

The sheriff's state of mind was such that he had not heard another step outside. The door opened now and Jim Barton came in, smiling at first, then quizzical as he beheld the steady gun in his friend's right hand and the other end of it against the sheriff's midriff.

"Hey, what's wrong here, Buck?" he demanded. "Don't you know you shouldn't shoot the sheriff?"

"The crooked ——!" Buck snarled. "I got a mind to drill him yet! He's sayin' you robbed his safe!"

The unbelieving look on Jim Barton's face was brief. He smiled a small, twisted smile.

"Well, now, this is news."

"I wasn't sayin' it was——" stammered McCracken. "I was just sayin' to Buck——"

Buck twisted the gun until its end made a little dent in the part of the sheriff's paunch it touched.

"You lyin', stealin' skunk! You was just tellin' me Jim robbed your damned safe and you know it! I want you to savvy he's my friend, Pat McCracken! I got a durned good notion to shoot you now, right through your ornery guts!"

Jim's long right arm reached out. His hand gripped the barrel of the Colt and he wrenched it away from the sheriff's belly.

"Put that thing away, Buck," he ordered. "You don't need a pistol to deal with a man like this."

"Wal, by hell, he insulted me by accusin' you of robbin' his safe!" swore Buck as he reluctantly

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jammed the old forty-four into its holster. "I ain't nohow used to havin' my friends insulted!"

As the deputy moved aside Jim's cold eyes fixed upon the sheriff.

"So your safe's been robbed, has it?"

McCracken stammered that it had. All his money had been taken.

"And why did you think I took it, McCracken?" With no weapon in his hand, Jim Barton looked as deadly as had the deputy with a six-shooter.

Shaking with fear and thwarted rage, McCracken answered that he had not openly accused Barton. He had merely thought of him as a suspect.

"Aw, you measly liar!" Buck interrupted. "You know you told me to my face he robbed your safe, and as how Harlan and Nesbit hired him to do it!"

Jim turned to glance at Buck, then brought his demanding eyes back to the sheriff.

"Why should Harlan and Nesbit want me to rob your safe, McCracken?"

Slumping in his chair, the sheriff tried to explain that the shock of the discovery of the robbery had been so great he had not known what he had said. Certainly there was no reason why the ranchers should have hired anybody to rob any safe.

"Well, they didn't hire me to rob yours!" Jim said, too calmly to add to the sheriff's peace of mind.

"Wal, mebbe they did have reasons," put in Buck, grinning.

"No, no!" McCracken cried out. "Tom Harlan and John Nesbit couldn't have had any reason for wantin' me robbed! Hell, why should they, Buck?"

Buck shrugged a skinny shoulder and drawled:

"You orter know that, Pat."

"'Course I know!" McCracken's voice rose almost

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to a shout. "Harlan and Nesbit are among my best friends! I didn't know what I was sayin'!"

"Aw, sure you didn't!"

"How much money did you have in the safe?" Jim demanded.

McCracken suddenly realised he could not truthfully answer this question without admitting he had more money than he was honestly entitled to possess. He licked full lips that had become unbearably dry and hot.

"It was quite a sum, Barton."

"Well, what is quite a sum, Sheriff?"

"Quite a lot of money," McCracken parried, and looked as if he were trying to remember.

"Several thousand dollars, eh?"

"Yes, several thousand dollars!" McCracken cried. "Say, Barton, I'm mighty sorry I even suspected you of takin' it. It was such a hell of a shock!"

"I don't know about that," Jim disagreed, "because I've never been robbed. But I do know I don't appreciate bein' accused of robbery, McCracken! I don't appreciate it a-tall."

Trying to smile, trying to impress the others with his sincerity, McCracken apologised. He had been so shocked and stunned he had not known a thing he was saying.

"Wal, you was a little flustered," Buck interrupted soberly.

"Yes, yes! I was, Buck! I didn't know I was accusin' Barton! It was somebody else! It must have been somebody else!"

"It sure is tough to lose a lot of money like this, ain't it, Pat?" Buck drawled.

"Sure, sure," the sheriff agreed. "It shakes a man up. It shakes him up like hell, boys! I wonder who could have done it! I wonder——?"

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"We might run over all possible suspects," Jim suggested, "that is if you feel like it, Sheriff."

McCracken was agreeing volubly when Buck Layton interrupted:

"Seems to me there ain't much use wastin' time ropin' and examinin' suspects, Pat. From the start it's all been boiled down to one with me. Yep, I could sure drop my loop over the hombre that robbed that safe if I was asked to."

McCracken did not know whether to look pleased or more frightened. Was he going to be accused of robbing himself? He tried to look eager, hopeful.

"You know who done the job, Buck?"

"Don't know exact," the under-sheriff drawled, "but I'd bet a dollar against a greaser centavo I could name the right one. Yeah, I'd bet a hundred against one centavo, Pat."

McCracken licked his lips and tried to see back of the deputy's squinted, inscrutable eyes.

"Throw your rope, Buck," Jim ordered. "Let's see whose neck it gets."

As Buck told of his suspicions the sheriff gasped, turned livid. He lifted from his chair, gripped the edge of the table.

"Wait! Wait, Buck! Are you accusin' my boy? Are you accusin' my son of robbin' his own father?"

"Now there, Pat, don't get riled," Buck advised. "I reckon it's little Georgie as done it, least I'm willin' to bet a hundred pesos against one centavo he did."

McCracken sank back. It was an appalling thought, to suspect his own son. He shook his head. He attempted to look stern and judicious, trying to give the impression that he would wield the axe no matter where the chips fell.

"I'll talk to George!" he declared. "But of course he doesn't know anything about this, men."

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"Huh!" Buck scoffed. "You mean he'll swear he don't know anything about it, Pat."

"Why not find your son and settle this now?" Jim said, half in query, half in command. "As it is, suspicion rests on me, and I sure don't like it!"

"Why—yes—yes!" McCracken agreed. "I'll find George and talk with him."

He was frantically eager to get away from the droll grin and inscrutable eyes of the under-sheriff. Perhaps Jim Barton suspected as much.

"I'll go and find George myself," he declared as he grabbed his hat. "You men stay here. Buck, best not let anybody in while I'm away."

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CHAPTER XXV

THE black-visaged Antrim slept little, and this little lightly. Hate for himself because he was an outlaw, and realisation of the weakness that kept him an outlaw made him lie awake during many a long night. His hatred for Littrell, too, was a cause of frequent sleeplessness.

After napping fitfully and with many distressing dreams, Antrim rose and dressed. He buckled on his cartridge-belt and adjusted his heavy weapons, for he had lived so long outside the law he felt neither secure nor clothed without the weapons.

"What's up, Black?" Andrus growled. "Day come?"

"Day's come," Antrim growled, and went out.

The valley was fresh with dew, and delicately fragrant of grass and wildflowers. The sun had just topped the easterly cliffs and was painting the opposite wall with red and gold. Black Antrim smiled and breathed deeply of the cool, rare air. He tested its fragrance with his nostrils. Of all times, he liked the wild world best when it was bathed in the first sun of new day. It made him think of the time he himself had been young, fresh, untinged by evil and crime. He looked at the reddish wall, admired the play of the morning light upon it. It held beauty and grandeur that appealed to the little that was still fine in his callous soul.

"This is a hell of a life! I wish I had took the other trail a long time ago!" he muttered, and not for the first time. "I'd give my interest in hell if I could find a way to turn back."

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He knew there was no way, that he would go on and on along the rough road he had chosen until he stepped from the last sheer, lawless rim into oblivion. He knew he had to die, and probably violently, and he wished that when the final moment came he might have some chance to expiate some of the wrongs he had done.

As was his morning habit, he had come out to survey all the rock-walled valley while the play of the new sun was upon it. Now he turned slowly and looked towards the lower end. He was surprised, but not shocked when he saw a horseman and a man on foot approaching. He recognised the rider immediately, but not the horse.

"The greaser's captured somebody," he told himself with savage pleasure. "He's sure drivin' that hombre ahead of him."

This was good. The vigilant Chico had likely frustrated some attempt at surprise. The man afoot was walking fast. He wore a cartridge belt but there were no guns in his holsters. That meant that Chico had been determined as well as vigilant.

Antrim moved to the door, called Littrell, who slept like a wild thing, tensed to wake at the slightest alarm, opened his eyes. He lifted to an elbow.

"Greaser's got somebody, Jack," Antrim said, shamed because he had to confide this news to the man he hated most on earth.

"Got somebody?" Littrell snapped.

"Yeah. Looks like he'd run across another prowler."

Andrus, who had heard, was already drawing on his overalls.

Littrell twisted lithely from his bunk, reached for his pants, then his boots. His movements were quick and precise. He lifted his belt and guns from beside

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his soiled pillow, swung the belt about his lean waist, buckled it.

Draper, who had been asleep only an hour, rolled over and grumbled at the noise.

"Aw, what's the matter? Can't you let a man sleep?"

"Chico's got somebody, Laredo," Andrus said excitedly. "Get up! Let's see who it is!"

Draper yawned and rolled from his bunk, complaining profanely because he had been roused.

Though haggard and worn out, and gripped by terrifying fear, George McCracken tried to look unperturbed as he came near. During every step of the fast walk from the lower end of the valley he had been conscious of the gun trained upon his back.

Yet the product of all his emotions was a desperate courage, which he knew to be shallow. A few times he had dreamed of being surrounded by a pack of ravening wolves and had been devoutly glad when he had awakened. Now he was surrounded by wolves, but he knew he was wide awake.

Even before he stopped at Chico's command, George saw the deadly disdain and contempt on the lean, handsome face of the outlaw leader. He saw, too, Antrim's black countenance, and the ominously amused faces of Draper and Andrus.

"Find him ride in, boss," explained the Mexican, and laughed. "So I ask him for his guns, and then I drive him ahead like the burro. He is the fine burro, no?"

Littrell made no answer to the facetious remark, but stared coldly at the captive's pale blue eyes, saw their lack of courage.

Quaking now, almost insanely eager for a place to sit down or at least somewhere that would brace his trembling legs, George McCracken licked his lips. He

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tried to square his shoulders, to smile as a brave man should. He wished he were as brave as these outlaws at whom he looked. He made his eyes steady and fixed them on the outlaw leader.

"You're Jack Littrell?"

"What the hell if I am? I want to know what you're doin' here, hombre! Don't you know it's certain death for any stranger here? Don't you know this is Red Gash Valley?"

"I hoped it was," McCracken stammered. "I was looking for Red Gash Valley. I wanted to find you, Mr. Littrell."

"Well, well," drawled Draper. "He says he's a-lookin' for Red Gash Valley."

"Haw, haw, haw!" Andrus guffawed. "He called Jack, Mister Littrell! Say, boss, you're comin' up in the world!"

"Shut your fool mouths!" Littrell snarled as his eyes fixed on those of the captive.

Black Antrim said nothing, but his deep-set eyes smouldered with dull fire. One look had told him here was an enemy not worth the name.

"Well, what you doin' here, man?" Littrell asked again. "Talk pronto, or your gun won't work!"

In swift, stammered words over which he had little control, George began to tell why he had come. He had come to demand, to beg that the rustlers leave Red Gash. No, no! He was not going to kill them if they did not go. He was going to buy them. He had money to pay them if they would get up and leave the San Martins.

Littrell's lean face registered misunderstanding. He lifted a hand.

"Wait a minute!" he ordered. "You say you're goin' to make us hightail out of here, paisano?"

"Like hell he is!" Andrus snickered.

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"Aw, sure, we're runnin' right now," laughed Draper.

George looked at them imploringly. He flung out shaking hands.

"But you don't understand, Mr. Littrell! Of course I can't run you out of here. I don't want to. But I tell you I've got money to pay you if you'll go! You've got to go! I've got to have you out of these mountains or——"

Littrell ripped out a curse. This was about the strangest event he had ever experienced. Yes, it was so strange it was funny.

"You say you got money, kid?" he growled.

"Yes, yes, I have money!" George stammered. "I'll pay you if you leave Red Gash Valley, if you'll leave these mountains for good!"

"How much money?"

"Lots! Lots of money!" George croaked hopefully. "I'll pay it all to you if you'll leave this place—and stay!"

His frightened eyes were beseeching now. Andrus and Draper were silent, for this was so unexpected it had shocked them from words or garrulous mirth.

"Show me the colour of your dinero, paisano!" Littrell ordered. "Money sure talks to me if she's got voice enough."

From his pockets George brought banknotes and gold with frantic, supplicating hands. If he could only finish this deal and leave!

"I'll be damned!" gasped Draper.

"Wal, if he ain't got the dinero!" ejaculated Andrus.

Antrim said nothing. His smouldering eyes seemed to pay little attention to the unexpected money.

"Throw the stuff on the ground," Littrell ordered. "There, ahead of you. That's what sure talks to me!"

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George hesitated, his hands filled with money. He smiled shakily.

"You'll leave this place and stay away if I pay all of it to you?" he begged.

"Shell it out!" Littrell commanded. "Throw it there on the ground! Want to see all you got!"

Encouraged now, George hastily emptied his pockets. He straightened and braced back his shoulders. He smiled as if he were a real man among men.

"That's all!"

Draper and Andrus uttered incredulous explanations, for the ground was littered with banknotes and gold coins.

"Say, just who the hell are you?" Littrell demanded.

"Me?" George gasped as if surprised that any one should ask this question.

"Yeah, you! Damned if I don't want to know the name of the first one of your breed I ever saw, hombre!"

"Why, I'm George McCracken. I'm Pat McCracken's son, Mr. Littrell."

For a long moment Littrell seemed not to comprehend. Then his lean face tensed and his steely eyes glowed.

"Are you the son of that crooked —— of a sheriff in Maguey?"

"Why yeah—yeah," George stammered, shaken again by panic as he beheld the deadly look in the outlaw leader's eyes. "I'm—Pat McCracken's my father. It was my——"

George McCracken died with the unfinished protestations in his throat. Littrell's hands had flashed to his guns and the guns had roared all in the fraction of a second

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But as Littrell fired Black Antrim uttered a roar like that of a maddened beast. He grabbed for his own guns. He was like a snarling, frenzied bear.

But if a bear is fast, a tiger is faster. Littrell's smoking six-shooters swung and roared again.

Antrim crumpled in his tracks as his first shot exploded harmlessly into the air. He fell with two bullet holes through his chest, and the blood that gushed from his mouth crimsoned some of his black beard.

Like some annihilating machine now, Littrell swung a little farther. He was tensed, crouched slightly. His head thrust forward while he held a six-shooter at each lean thigh.

"Well," his voice was lethal for all its softness, "do you want some of it? Speak up!"

Andrus, who was as callous and brutal as any of the others, felt sick, shocked at what he had witnessed, yet hot with disdain and contempt.

"You didn't have any right to shoot them down like they was a couple of dogs, Jack!" he snarled, and made an instinctive movement towards his six-shooter.

Then Littrell's guns spat smoke and fire and lead again and Andrus crumpled, four holes through his chest. He swung the weapons, but lowered them and laughed loudly as he saw that Draper had his hands in the air and that the Mexican's swarthy face had gone pasty with terror.

"So you two don't want any of it?" Littrell sneered, and to show his disdain, rammed his weapons into their holsters.

"Dios, no!" cried Chico. "Madre de Dios, no!"

"None of it for me," muttered Draper as he kept his hands well away from his guns.

The outlaw chief calmly looked down at the three

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men he had killed, then at the gold and banknotes that littered the trampled ground.

"Drag this carrion away!" he ordered. "Get a shovel and plant 'em, back there behind the corral!"

When Draper and the Mexican had dragged the three bodies away, Littrell bent and gathered up the money. He calmly counted it, laughed with happy incredulity.

"Well, if he didn't fetch plenty of it! Nice little haul, and no risk or trouble! And it's mine!"

He heaped the money into a pile, rose. He went into the cabin and brought out a small sack. Into it he scooped gold and paper currency. Then he carried the sack into the shack and hid it under the grass tick of his bed.

Next he sauntered out to look at the horse George McCracken had ridden to where it had been taken by Chico. It was a good horse, though somewhat tired now. Littrell stripped off saddle and bridle and slapped the animal on the rump.

"Go get yourself some water and grass," he said amiably. "Then you'll feel better."

If there was any tremble in the long fingers that reloaded the forty-fours, it was caused by Littrell's silent mirth. This was good indeed, having fortune brought to the very door of the cabin. He had little thought for the human lives he had snuffed out, except for Antrim's.

"I've known for weeks it was comin' to this. I had to kill him," he chuckled. "Well, it's done."

He felt only contempt for Andrus, and for his rashness and slowness. He thought of George McCracken not at all, except as a fool.

As if nothing unusual had occurred to break the routine of his lawless life, Littrell sauntered round the house, to the corral near which Draper and Chico

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were digging a wide, shallow grave. He leaned nonchalantly against the corral fence and watched them, occasionally offering advice. They worked frantically, for they believed they were little more alive than the three corpses that lay close by.

"Like to see you hombres do a little honest work," Littrell laughed. "Hump your backs."

Draper paused his worn shovel, but Chico continued to work frantically with the old pick.

"How deep you want it, boss?" Draper asked.

"Couple of feet, I reckon," drawled the outlaw leader. "That'll keep 'em from bein' buzzard meat. Don't want buzzards round the cabin."

As he leaned against the fence and watched the men labour, Littrell planned his future. He had a lot of money now. He would wait till Ritter, Kirkup and Nashwilder came with the Harlan girl or a plan as to how she could be kidnapped. Once the girl had been stolen and ransomed, he would ride out of the San Martins. Yes, he would do just what the fool, McCracken, had asked him to do.

When the excavation in the creek-bottom silt was two feet deep, Littrell ordered Draper to lie down in it.

"Want to see if it's long enough. Wouldn't want them three hombres to cramp their necks.

Draper had barely measured his length in the grave he had helped to dig when Littrell deliberately shot him. The Mexican flung up his hands in horror and begged that his life be spared. He was cursed by Littrell, who toyed dexterously with his smoking six-shooters.

"Aw, I'm not goin' to shoot you, Chico," he laughed. "I need you to guard the lower end of the valley."

Incredulity took the place of stark fear and horror

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on the swarthy face. Chico worked frantically when told to drag the other bodies into the grave and cover them. He was sweating and breathing hard when this grim, gruesome work was done.

"Dios! Madre de Dios!" he begged. "I would like for to have the small drink of whisky, boss!"

Littrell ordered him to come to the cabin and get the drink. When Chico had drunk from the bottle offered him, he stammered that he must return to his sentry post.

"Yeah, get back pronto, Chico. And if you catch any other —— tryin' to get into Red Gash, bring him in to me."

Chico, who had travelled little during the past few years unless he had had a horse under him, felt no need now for a mount. He hurried down the grassy valley as fast as his legs could carry him, while his heart beat frantically. As he neared his horse, which he had left staked near the pile of tumbled rocks, he looked back. The cabin was a mile away, and not a man was in sight.

Chico hurried to secure the food he had here in a cache. He tied it back of the cantle of his saddle. Lest he be seen by Littrell, he led the animal round the rock pile as if he meant to find a new spot in which to tether it. Once out of sight of the cabin, however, he hauled himself into the saddle and clamped the spur rowels against the sides of the horse. He headed down the creek trail towards where the dim path led through the rocks towards the low mesa at the right. He was still shaking, for he had just seen four men meet violent deaths.

"Por el nombre de la madre de Dios!" he muttered as he crossed his sturdy breast. "I do not mean to be the fifth! Caramba! I shall put many miles between myself and Red Gash Valley, and muy pronto!"

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CHAPTER XXVI

LANKY HIGGINS, Frank Fletcher and Windy Irwin rode unsuspectingly into the trap. The Red Gash outlaws had espied them from afar and prepared the ambush. As the three Bar H zealots entered the low pass, three men rose from amid rocks and brush, with rifles in their hands.

A combination of shock and common sense made the three cowboys keep their hands away from their guns. There was no doubting the deadly menace in Ritter's and Kirkup's beard-stubbled faces, and Nashwilder, with his soiled and tangled yellowish beard, looked as mean as a surly bear.

"My gosh!" gasped Windy, who forgot that he was the leader of this expedition against the rustlers. "Where you fellers come from?"

Lanky and Fletcher blurted no such useless questions, for one look told them who these men were. The outlaws, without relaxing their vigilance, broke from the brush, which was about waist-high. Sensibly, the cowboys offered no resistance when they were disarmed. They were ordered to get off their horses. On the ground they grouped roughly, all surging inwardly with futile rage and humiliation.

"Which direction you three a-travellin'?" Ritter demanded.

"Windy's loquacity was dammed in his throat.

"Just lookin' for cattle," Lanky managed.

"Yeah, and does that take any hide off the seat of your pants, fellers?" growled Fletcher, who was the angriest of the three.

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Nashwilder laughed, a guttural maudlin sound, though he was stone sober.

"Takes plenty guns to look after cattle, don't it?" Kirkup sneered as he indicated the six pistols and three rifles taken from the captives. "What you figure on doin', killin' the cows?"

"You ——es are out lookin' for us!" Ritter snarled. "Don't lie about it!"

The Bar H men realised they could do nothing but lie, for certainly it meant quick death if they confessed they were out after the very men who held them prisoners. Lanky and Fletcher were lying valiantly when Windy got back his voice.

"Now looky here, what's the use of all this damned foolishness?" he demanded. "We don't know you three from Adam's off ox, and we don't care who you are. We're Bar H men out lookin' over the range. We don't even care if you are a pack of horse thieves."

"Naw? You don't?" Ritter sneered. "Ain't that fine? Well, that's just what we are, horse thieves, except that we're worse."

"Ever heard of the Red Gash gang?" Nashwilder chuckled.

Lanky and Fletcher were now so angry with themselves that they could do nothing but curse under their breaths. They should have risked defence even against odds. Their mental condition was not improved by the fact that they had heard plenty about the Red Gash gang, and talked plenty about it, though this was the first time they had had first-hand experience with any of its members. They were temporarily dumb, but not so Windy. He seemed to realise that when he was talking he did not have time to think of the violent end that seemed to stare him in the face.

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"Hell! Of course we heard about the Red Gash gang!" he declared. "Never run across any of 'em, but from what we heard they're a fine lot of fellers. I always meant to ride up to Red Gash and have a talk with you men, but durned if I could ever get round to it. We ain't got nothin' against you. You ain't never done us no harm."

"But we're damned soon goin' to!" Nashwilder interrupted profanely.

Windy jerked his head about.

"What'd I ever do to you?" he demanded.

"Nothin', and you sure ain't goin' to get the chance to!" snarled the big, bearded outlaw.

Kirkup was now laughing uproariously. He sobered till his face wore a very pleased grin.

"Listen to that, fellers! He says he's comin' up to see us as soon as he has the time! Wonder if he got a writ invitation to come to Red Gash?"

"What he got is a ticket to hell!" Nashwilder snarled.

"Bet your life!" Kirkup agreed. "What's the use of puttin' the job off?"

There was no doubting the deadly menace of the outlaws, in looks or words. Windy lost his tongue again, except to use it to moisten his lips. His sun-browned face had drained of much of its usual colour. Fletcher and Lanky felt as helpless as pups in a sack, with a man ready to drown them. The danger, however, did not rob Lanky of all his nerve.

"I don't see any use of killin' us," he reminded. "Take our guns and we'll ride back."

"You'll ride to hell, pronto, if I have my way!" Nashwilder corrected with his thick, maudlin laugh. "I'm for rubbin' you three out right here. If you're here in our way it's your own damned fault."

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"They're in our way all-right," growled Kirkup.

Ritter seemed to ponder. He asked the riders where they belonged.

"At the Bar H," Lanky replied. "We ain't makin' any bones about that. If you don't believe we're out lookin' for cows it's your own fault."

"Aw, kill 'em, and let's get goin'!" Nashwilder snarled as he lifted his six-shooter. "What you waitin' for?"

Ritter ordered the big desperado to keep quiet.

"Don't forget I'm runnin' this outfit, Nash!"

"And makin' a damned poor job of it, if you ask me! If I had my way there'd be no talk to them coyotes. The number of weapons they was carryin' prove they wasn't out after cattle."

Windy, Fletcher and Lanky were very grateful for this brief lease on life.

"The Bar H the Harlan ranch?" Ritter inquired.

"Yeah, Lanky answered.

"Sure," Windy got going again, "it's the Harlan ranch. Owned by Tom Harlan, best man in the whole state to work for. Never worked for an outfit that set up such good grub for its punchers. Say, if you three are lookin' for a good spread to ride for I'll——"

"You'll play hell!" snarled Nashwilder. "You're goin' to stay here, and for a long time, unless them fine friends of yours down at the ranch come and tote your daid body away, feller!" The bearded outlaw now had his Colt pointed at Windy, who braced himself against the bullet.

"But hell!" he protested, "You ain't goin' to kill us! That wouldn't do you any good!"

"It sure would do me good!" retorted Nashwilder with an evil laugh. "It'd do me plenty good."

Four swift strides took the lither Ritter to the big

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desperado's side. He gripped Nashwilder's wrist and ordered him to be silent.

"There's no rush about rubbin' these three fools out, Nash. They sure can't get away, and maybe I got a better idea."

Nashwilder lowered his pistol and swore.

Kirkup was ordered to watch the captives.

"Come with me, Nash," said Ritter. "I want to tell you my idea."

With grateful but doubtful eyes the three captives watched as the two outlaws walked a short distance away. Kirkup's guns were too much a menace to allow Windy, Fletcher and Lanky to think seriously of attempting to break for their own guns which lay in a scattered pile on the ground.

There was a pleased, almost mirthful twinkle in Nashwilder's eyes as he came back. He took up the work of guard, and Kirkup walked out to join Ritter.

Curious as they were, and by now resigned to sudden death, the Bar H riders could not understand a word that was said ten yards away. Ritter and Kirkup came back, the latter looking savagely pleased.

"You three want to live?" Ritter asked quietly.

"Sure do," Lanky drawled. Even temporary respite was better than swift death.

"Yeah," grunted Fletcher.

"Bet your damned life!" Windy exploded. "Who wouldn't want to live? Wouldn't you?"

"That's for me to answer, and I don't spout about it," Ritter retorted. "Say, is this Bar H ranch where that Harlan gal lives?"

"You mean Nancy Harlan?" Windy gasped. "Hell, do you know her? She's the finest gal in the whole durned country. Purty, too!"

"Aw, shut up, Windy!" Lanky sneered. "Let's

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see what these men want. As for me I want to get out of here."

The captive Bar H riders did not have to wait long for explanation. Ritter said he and his two companions were bound for the Bar H, and their purpose was to steal Nancy Harlan and take her to Red Gash Valley where they would hold her for ransom.

"My gosh!" Windy gasped. "You can't do that! Nancy's just a girl!"

Mingling mirthful words with his thick laugh, Nashwilder said they did not think Nancy Harlan was a red heifer or a sorrel filly.

"You bet your damned life she ain't!" Windy growled. "She's a nice girl, Nancy is, and purty, too!"

He was cursed and ordered to be silent.

"Well, I just wanted to talk," he protested lamely.

"We can get along without your talkin'," reminded Nashwilder. "Or you'll be doin' all the talkin' you want in hell if you don't keep that big mouth shut!"

"Huh!" Windy snorted now in genuine rage and courage. "Say, you big dirty coyote, you gimme a knife or a gun and I'll settle this here argument with you! You lousy skunk, I stood about all I'm goin' to stand offen you!"

Though the big outlaw's bloodshot eyes flashed with momentary hate, he laughed loudly. He pointed a dirty finger at Windy.

"Listen to the little banty rooster crow, fellers!" he taunted.

Windy sprang, but was caught by Lanky and Fletcher, who advised him not to be a fool.

"Fool?" he shrilled. "Lemme at him, and I'll cut his damned throat with my pocket knife!"

Ritter cursed out an order for silence. When he had it he made his proposition. Lanky and Fletcher would

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be held as hostages, while Windy was to ride to the Bar H ranch. There, by force, cajolery or any sort of deceit, he was to entice Nancy Harlan out on to the range. Once well away from the home place, he was to kidnap her and take her to Red Gash Valley. Not wholly comprehending, but understanding enough, the three cowboys stared at one another in consternation.

"We'll take these two fellers back to Red Gash," went on Ritter. "When you fetch us the gal they'll be turned loose safe and alive, and you, too, Windy feller. All we want's the gal."

Lanky and Fletcher realised they could say nothing to show how they reacted to this savage proposition. Even Windy had sense enough to know he must not talk much now. Not one of them believed that once inside the outlaw valley they would ever be allowed to leave alive, even if Windy brought Nancy Harlan. Yet each knew that here was the prospect of another lease on life and that life was good and worth living.

"What you want the girl for?" Lanky demanded.

"So that rich old father of hers'll dig up plenty dinero to get her back!" answered Ritter. "We won't harm the gal, that is if her old man's ready to pay what we want to get her back."

Mute messages passed among the three cowboys. They said that Lanky and Fletcher were willing to go to Red Gash Valley and die, and that Windy could turn back to the Bar H with the demand of the outlaws, but that he would not return with Nancy Harlan.

Like martyrs, Lanky and Fletcher saw that if death were worth while at all, it was worth while now, especially if by dying they could save Nancy. Besides, they had made a mess of life.

Accustomed to hard life and often to brutality, they

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were nevertheless appalled and horrified by the outlaw offer. Windy was as shocked as the others, but he was not robbed of the small innate shrewdness that was under his loquacity. He would return to the ranch, tell of the brutal proposition, and thus give the alarm. Nancy would be saved. Yes, and a posse would head for Red Gash and rescue Fletcher and Lanky. Windy almost groaned aloud. He did blink. It would sure be tough to know that his friends were here or back in Red Gash with the outlaws, and that if they had to die it would be his fault.

"That proposition hit you fellers right?" Ritter wanted to know.

The courage of martyrs was large now in the breasts of the two.

"Sure it hits me right," Fletcher declared. "Old Tom Harlan's got a lot more money than he needs. I'd like to see him have to dig up a big chunk of it to get the girl back safe."

"That's just what I was thinkin' about!" Lanky said emphatically. "It'll do me a hell of a lot of good to see Tom Harlan parted from a slice of that dinero of his. Hope he has to dig up about twenty thousand dollars!"

"It would sure serve him right," Windy agreed, but dourly. "He's got too much dinero."

The outlaws said that twenty thousand dollars would be sufficient ransom.

"That's the figure Jack Littrell set," Ritter explained.

Though the Bar H cowboys had never seen the rustler chief, his name held for them much sinister significance. Before their eyes now they had the word-picture Jim Barton had painted of Littrell, though Jim himself had seen him only from a considerable distance.

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Lanky found a little hope and gripped it heroically. Jim Barton had lived through bullets and fire. He had slipped into Red Gash Valley and actually made away with one of the outlaws' horses. There might be a small chance that he and Fletcher would get out alive.

"Is Littrell at the Valley?" asked Windy, who was resigned to whatever might come, though he felt it gravely unjust that he himself was to be allowed to go back to the ranch while his friends must die. He did not feel as sorrowful about Fletcher as he did about Lanky. He and Lanky had been saddle-partners even before they had come to ride for the Bar H four years ago. Fletcher was all right, too, but he just didn't know him as well as Lank.

"Gosh!" Windy groaned, blinking hard. "Lanky and me won't have no more chances to have any fun!"

"Well, what are we waitin' for?" Nashwilder growled. "If this here talkin' jasper's goin' to go get the gal, the sooner it's done the better."

Windy asked whether he might shake hands with his friends.

"Sure," chuckled Ritter, "go ahead and shake their arms off. But don't try any monkey business."

"I'll sure see they don't try any monkey business!" growled Nashwilder as he drew both his Colts.

Windy, almost choking because he could not voice the sad and heroic thoughts with which his head was filled, pumped Fletcher's arm. He gripped Lanky's hand for a long time.

"Don't be scared, Lank," he offered gruffly. "I'll sure be along with Nancy. Durn that girl, it'll serve her right!"

Ritter was now squatting on the rocky earth and writing on leaves from a dirty notebook with the stub

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of a pencil. He carefully ripped out the leaves, rose.

"Take these here, Windy feller," he commanded. "You be sure to leave 'em where they'll be found after you get away with the gal. They'll show old Harlan how much dinero we want for her, and how to fetch it. Recollect, only one man's to fetch that twenty thousand pesos, and he's to come without any guns!"

"I sure savvy," Windy agreed heroically as he stuffed the papers into the top pocket of his buttonless vest. "I'll leave 'em where Tom Harlan can find 'em after I get away with Nancy."

Windy had to be ordered to climb one of the horses. He waved encouragingly to his friends before he trotted away, but there was a big lump in his throat. He was never going to see Lanky again! They would never play pranks together, or take a few drinks!

Presently he looked back. The narrow pass was devoid of human life. Windy caught a little hope, however. He had not heard any shots such as would have been used to kill his friends.

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CHAPTER XXVII

THE reflection from a sun that had set played in soft colours along the easterly wall of Red Gash Valley. The retreat was cool, filling with mauve and amethyst shadows. Littrell sat upon a bench before the door of the cabin and suffered no remorse because of the men he had murdered that day.

He did not feel lonely, for now as before he felt sufficient in himself. When he wanted more men he could find them. He was puzzled, however, as to why George McCracken had come with so much money to bribe him and the other outlaws to leave the mountain hangout. Some hours before it had occurred to him where the fool had got so many thousands of dollars. Now he had the money, and meant to keep it. He thought it a rare joke that he had in this manner got back the money he had paid the crooked sheriff for immunity.

Dusk was lying over the bottom of the valley, but the upper easterly wall was still bright when Littrell saw riders coming from the south. Instantly alert, he stepped inside the cabin and came out with a rifle, which he leaned against the wall. The fact that the riders were coming up the open told him they were not enemies. Enemies would have kept to cover.

He soon saw that three of the men were the outlaws he had sent to reconnoitre the Harlan ranch or to kidnap Harlan's daughter if that were practical. That there were more than three horsemen gave him a few minutes of savage and jubilant hope. They had miraculously run across the girl and had brought her

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in. She must have had some one with her, for there were two captives. Then when he saw that neither of these was a woman he cursed softly in savage disappointment, ending with:

"I wonder where they got them two? Damned if it don't look like somebody was tryin' to get into this valley about twice a day!"

Ritter, Kirkup and Nashwilder, who knew well the ruthlessness of their leader, had experienced some doubt as to the wisdom of what they were doing, but had talked it over and decided they had best make a bold front of it. They believed they had done a good act of strategy in sending the Bar H man back to the ranch to get the girl.

"Well, where'd you trap them two?" Littrell demanded as the riders reined in.

Lanky and Fletcher were not in a mood to be impressed by the darkening grandeur of Red Gash Valley. In fact all they noticed about it was its desolation and the fortress-like look of its encompassing walls.

Ritter, as leader of the expedition, offered a brief explanation.

"So?" snapped Littrell, his steely eyes on the two captives.

"We figgered it was a wise turn," put in Nashwilder. "If that jigger gets the gal for us, Jack——"

Though they had not been tied to their saddles, the Bar H cowboys had found no opportunity to attempt escape. They found none now, for as Kirkup, Ritter and Nashwilder dismounted they did so in such manner that they could still watch the prisoners. Littrell stood rigid, alert, looking at the two men left on horses as if debating whether or not they were worth killing.

"Where's the rest of the outfit?" Ritter inquired.

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"They're here!" Littrell growled. "To hell with them!"

The returned outlaws hesitated in their unsaddling, for they had caught something new and deadlier than usual in the look and words of their chief. They resumed their work, but looked questionally about. Nashwilder sidled to Ritter. He whispered:

"What you reckon's happened?"

"Damned if I savvy."

Littrell was now pacing nervously to and fro. His head was bent a little but every sense was alert, and his brain working furiously. He stopped after his three men had flung the saddles against the cabin wall and loosed their horses.

"We'll talk this thing over!" he snapped. "I want time to decide whether what you fellers did was best. Get them men off their horses, and let's have some supper."

Lanky and Fletcher had had complete confidence that they would be held as hostages until the outlaws were convinced Windy would not come with Nancy Harlan. To get such proof would require two or three days. Two or three days were worth living, and each hour might offer some remote chance to escape. Now they looked hard at each other, but could not voice the new fear they felt. They were ordered to dismount.

"What sort of place you think this is?" Littrell sneered. "We don't keep any servants round here! The sooner you find that out the better!"

At the leader's order they unsaddled their horses and turned them loose.

"They won't stray," Littrell explained. "Feed's too good. Besides, I don't know that you'll be needin' 'em again." He paused to smile as he further appraised the prisoners. Then he laughed harshly. "Likely you

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two'll have to use wings if you get out of Red Gash. Nash, you and Kirk herd the ——es inside and fix some grub! Be pronto about it, I'm hungry."

The Bar H cowboys were escorted inside and ordered to sit down on a bunk well away from any weapons. The numerous firearms they saw, and the stock of ammunition spoke eloquently of the nature of the men who held them captive. They were somewhat puzzled, however, because there were but four men here. They had understood that Littrell had seven or eight men.

Kirkup and Nashwilder immediately began preparing supper. Littrell called Ritter outside. They soon returned, and one after the other the leader called the other outlaws out. He told each the same story. Draper, Andrus and Antrim had rebelled against authority, decided to take over the running of the outfit. In self-protection he had been forced to kill them. He made no mention of young McCracken.

"What about the greaser, Jack?" asked Kirkup, who was the last to be told. "Rub him out, too?"

The outlaw leader jerked up his head. His thin nostrils dilated.

"Wasn't the greaser down there in the rocks?"

Kirkup answered that he and his companions had not been challenged as they had ridden in. Nor had they seen anything of the Mexican lookout. However, they had seen fresh horse tracks leading along the rocky trail and southwestward from the rim of the mesa. Kirkup added that these tracks looked as if they had been made by a horse just starting to travel fast.

"That greaser's high-tailed it!" Littrell swore. "Well, let him go! We can get along without him."

Jack Littrell was not lacking in cold courage. In fact he felt no more fear of losing his own life than he felt reluctance in taking the life of another man. Born

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brutal and reckless, years of crime had made him a fatalist. When the right bullet came along he would take it and turn up his toes.

The swift and successful extermination of three of his own men, especially Black Antrim, and the unexpected possession of so much money added much to his brutal egotism and arrogance. He was determined now not to leave Red Gash Valley until he had the twenty thousand dollars he would demand as ransom for the Harlan girl. Whether the Bar H rider brought her or not was of little consequence. Littrell intended to get her one way or another.

He felt no insecurity, for no attack seemed imminent. Once he had the girl in the valley, the ranchers or even the officers would not dare to attack in force for fear she would be harmed. If worse came to worst he could hold each rocky portal of Red Gash Valley against a company of soldiers with two or three men.

"Come up and fill your bellies," Littrell invited when hot meat and bread were on the rough table.

"That suits me," Lanky drawled.

"Me, too," added Fletcher, though with more confidence than he was feeling. "I could eat a dead dog."

"Dog hell!" Littrell laughed. "This is prime Bar H beef. We always serve it. Old Harlan has been sure mighty kind in supplyin' us with meat."

"Yeah, mighty generous," Nashwilder agreed, and guffawed. "When we want a yearlin' or a two-year-old, all we gotta do is ride out and get it."

Just now Fletcher and Lanky were not thinking of how many Bar H cattle had been stolen, for they were fully aware they were in a very tight spot. They were thinking of themselves, and Windy, and Nancy

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Harlan, and what might happen to-morrow, and whether for them there would be a to-morrow.

Though they sat down with ravenous appetites and the desire to satisfy them, they soon lost their eagerness for food when they heard what the outlaws were saying. It was but a few minutes before the cowboys were aware that even to-day brutal murder had been done right here.

Lanky found Fletcher's boot under the table and pressed it as if to give warning that their fate might be little better than that of the men who formed the subject of the outlaws' talk.

"Haw, haw, haw!" Nashwilder gave voice to his maudlin, guttural laugh. "So you had to rub Antrim out, did you, Jack?"

"Yeah, I had to shoot the black ——," Littrell answered with such lack of feeling that Lanky and Fletcher shivered. "I'd known it was comin' for a good while though."

"Say," demanded Ritter, "was Black fast when it came to his last draw?"

Littrell's laugh was contemptuous. He shrugged. "Slow as cold-tar," he drawled. "He was that damned slow I was almost ashamed to shoot him."

"Yeah, I'll bet you was!" Kirkup laughed.

They ate for a few minutes in silence while the two captives tried to telegraph their emotions by pressing each other's boots under the table.

"How about them other two—Andrus and Laredo, I mean?" Ritter asked. "Did they show any speed, Jack?"

"Nothin' to get excited about," Littrell answered dryly. "They decided to set into the damned game on Black's side. Their cards wasn't big enough. That was all."

When the meal was over, Lanky and Fletcher were

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told they could smoke, and ordered to resume their seats on the bunk.

The flickering candle, which, with the fireplace, furnished illumination, made weird shadows on the rough walls and dirt floor and fell upon Littrell as with long, careful fingers he rolled and lit a cigarette. He leaned back a little and puffed slowly, as if meditating pleasurably. The Bar H men could not but feel something magnetic about the outlaw leader. He certainly had the brains of the outfit, and plenty of cold nerve.

What made Littrell the more fascinating and surprising was that he could smile with what looked like boyish naïvette and candour. His smile had these qualities now as he turned to the two on the bunk. His quiet voice held a judicious quality, and when he spoke a command the other three outlaws dropped their work of ridding the table. The burly and dirty Nashwilder's bloodshot eyes seemed to hold an ephemeral look of more intelligence than usual, as if he had just received an inspired thought.

"Well, boys," the outlaw leader began, "it's time for us to decide with these two specimens you brought in."

"Wait a minute, boss," Nashwilder interrupted. "Here's somethin' that just struck me. As long as that Windy hombre has gotta fetch the gal here, I don't see the sense of keepin' these two and takin' the chance of 'em gettin' away."

Though the cowboys tried valiantly to look as if they did not understand, they felt cold shivers run up and down their spines as they watched the quiet deliberation the outlaw leader seemed to give this brutal suggestion.

"Yes," Littrell drawled as a cruel grin came to his face, "that's one of the points we have to consider. There don't seem much sense in keepin' 'em."

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CHAPTER XXVIII

About mid-afternoon Charley Hanchett, a rider from the Circle N outfit, arrived with startling news from the Nesbit ranch. Lije Ford had eluded the vigilance of his guards and found a pistol. He had managed to get a horse and saddle, but as he had started to ride away he had attempted to shoot John Nesbit. The crooked cattle buyer had instead been killed by Jake Dort, one of the Circle N cowboys.

Joe Holliday listened to the story with grim pleasure.

"Wal, it don't s'prise me none," he commented. "Ford was meaner'n snake pizen, and he'd killed more'n one man in his time."

Hanchett was on his way to Maguey for the sheriff, but before he could leave the Bar H two riders were seen coming from the direction of the county seat. They proved to be Jim Barton and Buck Layton. Nancy, who was beside the house with the others, breathed more easily when she discovered that Jim Barton showed no signs of having had a high time in town. He smiled serenely and did not slouch in his saddle, though Buck rode with his usual loose-jointed lack of grace.

The newcomers were greeted cordially by Harlan, his wife and Holliday. Nancy averted her eyes when she saw Jim's admiring look.

"Why, Buck!" she cried. "What's that on your vest?"

Buck looked down at the worn garment.

"Must be some gravy I done split on it," he

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drawled, and began to scratch an imaginary stain with a thumbnail.

Nancy touched a shield on which was engraved the word "SHERIFF."

"That's not spilled gravy, Buck."

"Aw, that?" Buck said soberly. "That's mine, I didn't steal it."

"But you are just a deputy."

"Was," corrected Buck.

The others looked at Layton, at Jim. Jim explained. McCracken had resigned, and the county commissioners immediately made Buck sheriff.

"Yep," remarked that individual, "they up and forced the job on me, folks."

"Then by golly," Harlan declared, "we've got a real sheriff at last!"

"Well," Jim grinned, "he may be, but he's got to prove it to me."

The rancher now demanded to be told why McCracken had so suddenly given up his office. He was told about the robbery of the office safe and that George McCracken had disappeared simultaneously with the money the safe had contained.

"But did George rob the safe?" Nancy cried. "Did he rob his own father?"

"Sorter looks thataway," Buck answered. "I ain't had the time to investigate it yet. McCracken asked us to let him find Georgie if he could."

Though Nancy had known George was shiftless, egotistical and irresponsible, she had not believed he would commit a crime like this, yet Buck said all the fingers of suspicion pointed directly to the son of the former sheriff. George's horse, saddle and guns were gone, also the money. Twice within the past few days Buck had seen George testing the combination of the

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safe, though George had believed no one had been watching.

Not one of the persons at the Bar H had the faintest suspicion that George had actually ridden into Red Gash Valley. For a few minutes they talked of the fugitive's possible whereabouts and motives for taking the money. Then Harlan told the news Charley Hanchett had brought. Jim looked grim and disappointed.

"I'm sorry about this," he declared. "I wanted to take Ford back across the mountains and convict him of his part in the rustling."

"Aw shucks!" objected old Joe. "Ford's got what was comin' to him by this time, and there's the trouble and money for prosecutin' him saved by the country. It looks like this new sheriff's got a job on his hands, I reckon. He'll have to ride to John Nesbit's ranch and make good and sure Ford's dead."

"That's right," Jim agreed. "Buck, you'll have to make the investigation."

Buck said the investigation could wait till he had had supper and a good sleep.

"My official duties has sure been wearin' on me," he drawled. "I'm goin' to stay here to-night if Missus Barton'll give me a stall to sleep in."

For the first time Nancy discovered she was shy, a little frightened in Jim Barton's presence. Though they said little to each other there was something in his eyes that made her heartbeat quicken. She wondered what part he had played in McCracken's sudden decision to end his career as sheriff of San Martin County.

"Buck," Harlan demanded, "are you goin' to stop the cattle stealin' in this country?"

"Well now," drawled the new sheriff, "I didn't

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know there was any cattle stealin' goin' on. Leastwise Pat McCracken never told me nothin' about it."

Buck and Jim took their horses to the barn, returned to join the others who were sitting in the shade of the cottonwoods at the northerly side of the ranch-house.

"Nancy," Buck drawled soberly, "it's sure tough to see you so turrible disappointed. You sure enough got my sympathy."

"Disappointed?" The girl's dark brows raised. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yeah," Buck resumed. "I savvy how this George feller has disappointed you, stealin' all that dinero and then high-tailin' it. I still figger he's hangin' round somewhere with all that money to pay honeymoon expenses."

After a swift rush of red from her throat to her dark hair, the girl paled and her dark eyes flashed.

"Buck Layton, do you mean to say you think I am going to marry George McCracken?"

"He's been a-comin' out here right often," Buck retorted, "and I sure done figgered he wasn't comin' out here to see the cowboys. And he's sech a brave hombre, I reckoned you couldn't overlook him."

Nancy was compelled to glance at Jim. His face was inscrutable. Her eyes flashed back to the new sheriff.

"I wouldn't marry George McCracken if he was the last man in the whole world!" she cried. She jumped to her feet and ran indignantly into the house.

Buck grinned after her. Harlan and his wife looked puzzled but not displeased.

"We've got some other news," said the rancher. "Windy and Lanky and Frank Fletcher are gone."

"Well, you ain't lost much," was Buck's comment.

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Jim, however, was interested. Those were the three who had tried to hang and shoot him. He asked where they had gone.

"That's what we don't know," said Harlan. "They wasn't here at daylight, and their horses and saddles and guns are missin', too. You didn't see anything of 'em in town? I thought they might have ridden in for a bust."

Buck said the three cowboys were not in town, that as far as he knew they had not been there. Discussion of the whereabouts of the missing riders and their reasons for disappearing became so general that no one noticed when Jim Barton slipped away.

He found Nancy standing in the middle of the living-room, looking perturbed and almost tearful. She lifted her head as he came in.

Nancy wanted to turn and run as the young man approached her, but she determined she would not. Her arms hung limply. He took her hands and lifted them. His blond head was bare, and she saw the curly unruliness of his hair as she looked into his blue eyes.

"You didn't intend to marry that skunk, McCracken, did you, Nancy?" he asked gently.

"No, no! Of course I didn't! But I don't see what business it is of Buck Layton's, or yours either!"

She strove to free her hands, but he held them securely. Before she had time to realise what he was doing he had crossed her wrists and was holding them with his big left hand. With his right he tilted up her face. She closed her eyes as she saw he was going to kiss her; opened them and tried to still her trembling when he had drawn his lips away.

"Do you mind, Nancy?"

She was forced to smile a little at his utter soberness, and she had the fleeting, hopeful thought that

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if he had killed and captured many desperadoes, he had at least not made love to many girls.

"Do you?" she challenged, then turned quite pink and lowered her eyes.

"I sure don't!" he cried in relief and what seemed like some surprise. "And you don't?"

For answer she drew her hands free and placed them against the sides of his deeply tanned face. She drew down his head and kissed him upon the lips.

"I'm not afraid of you, Jim Barton," she whispered, and wondered what she was saying. "I'm not afraid of you at all."

For once in his adventurous life Jim Barton was shaken. This was incredible, amazing. He placed his hands upon her shoulders and looked soberly in to the depths of her dark eyes.

"I don't see why you should be afraid of me, Nancy." There was an unnatural huskiness and a great gentleness in his voice. "I don't want the girl I love to be afraid of me, any more than I shall be afraid of her."

A twinkle of dancing light came into her eyes, and her red lips quirked.

"I didn't say I loved you, Jim."

He replied that it had not been necessary for her to say it. It had been in her eyes, in her smile, in the sweet warmth of her kiss.

"You can't believe them," she protested.

"But I do, Nancy. I believe them all."

With an arm he drew her close so that he might look directly into her misted, starry eyes.

"Nancy, Nancy girl, I love you," he said. "I know it may not be right to say this after only a day or so of knowing you, but I reckon I'm that sort of man. I always told myself that when I ran across the right girl I wouldn't lose time telling her. Will you

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marry me after this rustling business is ended, that is if——"

"If you come out alive?" she replied, managing to refrain from clutching him frantically about the neck.

"Yes, honey. That's to be taken into consideration."

She bent her head to hide the sudden fear that had cruelly dimmed her happiness, and he pressed his lips to her dark, soft hair.

"Will you marry me, Nancy? Anyway, I want you to know I love and respect you with all my heart."

Before she could reply there came unnatural noises from outside.

"Oh!" she cried. "What is that, Jim? Somebody has just come!"

When they hurried out they saw Windy Irwin on a sweat-streaked horse. Windy himself looked drawn, haggard, weary.

"Why, Windy, where on earth did you come from?" Nancy cried as she swung from the porch. "And where have you been? What has become of Lanky and Frank?"

Jim appraised the newcomer with calm eyes. Something was very much wrong. Windy slid from his saddle and sank into a chair. He groaned as he looked at the anxious girl, at the others who were grouped around.

"Windy! Windy, what's happened?" Nancy insisted as she dropped a hand on his shoulder. "Tell us!"

"Yeah, cowboy, what is wrong?" said her father.

Jim was again possessed of his characteristic impassivity in the face of crisis, for he knew that no little thing had thus agitated Windy. Buck Layton's droll face was comically eager now.

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Never in all his loquacious life had Windy found it so hard to talk, though half the way to the Bar H he had rehearsed what he would say and how he would say it. When words finally came they poured from his lips in an almost incoherent stream. He jumped to his feet and waved his arms and clapped his hands for emphasis.

"What?" Harlan cried. "You mean to tell us Lanky and Frank are in the hands of those Red Gash outlaws?"

"Oh, it can't be!" Mrs. Harlan faltered.

Nancy had drawn back so she might look more intently at the cowboy. Was this another of his pranks? Was it one of his monumental lies? Could it be part of some joke he and Lanky had agreed upon?"

"But, Windy," she demanded, "why did you let them surprise you? Why didn't you put up a fight? What on earth made you three start out to Red Gash Valley anyhow?"

Windy grinned now and hung his head, but he told the entire story honestly.

"We just up and let 'em trap us, I reckon. We wasn't lookin' for 'em away down there, it was round twenty miles from Red Gash, I reckon. We was just three durned fools. But they sure got Lank and Fletch."

Then he suddenly realised he had told but part of his story, and not the part that had troubled him most as he had ridden hard for the ranch. He stared at Nancy, at her father and mother, and wished he had never seen the Bar H range. He fumbled in his vest pocket for papers and tobacco, and found the pages from Ritter's notebook. He thrust them violently towards Harlan.

"There! Take 'em and read 'em!" he shrilled. "They'll tell——"

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Sensing something portentious, Jim Barton caught the three leaves before the rancher's hand had closed on them.

"Let me take a look, Mr. Harlan."

The brown paper shook in Windy's fingers so violently that grains of tobacco bounced from it. Buck dexterously rolled a cigarette, lit it and placed the unlit end between Windy's lips.

"Th-thanks, Buck," the cowboy stammered, and drew in a deep draw of smoke.

All watched Jim as he read, placing one soiled leaf back of the others after his eyes had taken in its meaning. It was Nancy who saw his unnatural paleness, his strange set of jaw, the surprise in his blue eyes.

"What is it, Jim?" she cried. "Is it——?"

He read the third page before he turned to look at her demanding face. She caught his encouraging smile.

"If you don't mind I'll read it to all of you," he said.

"Yes, yes! Read it, Barton," the rancher ordered. "This is all mighty strange."

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CHAPTER XXIX

CONSTERNATION and outright shock came to the faces of those who listened as Jim Barton read the outlaw message. Nancy's pretty face slowly paled, for it was difficult for her to believe she was so intimately associated with what Jim read.

Windy Irwin flung away his cigarette and jumped to his feet.

"Now you folks looky here!" he shrilled. "I didn't come after Nancy! Hell, I didn't expect to take her back with me! The outlaws gimme them notes, and I promised to fetch 'em here to you folks."

"They wanted to steal my girl and then charge me twenty thousand dollars to get her back, eh?" Harlan muttered as he looked at Nancy.

"But she can't go!" Nancy's mother cried. It's utterly foolish! Do they think——?"

They were suddenly thinking more or less the same, of Lanky and Frank Fletcher back there in the San Martins, held as hostages. Buck Layton, though he had seen many savage and trying situations, had never before been brought face to face with one like this. Nor had Jim Barton.

"Wal, drat my skin!" Joe Holliday muttered. "If this hyar ain't about the nerviest thing I ever heard of!"

It was cold, brutal audacity indeed, yet it contained the elements of potential tragedy.

"Windy!" Mrs. Harlan cried. "I don't see why you ever brought in such a note from those outlaws! You know we won't let Nancy go!"

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"Sure I knowed it, ma'am," Windy declared miserably. "I knowed it from the start, but they told me to fetch it here, and I didn't know what else to do with it. And they told me how Lanky and Fletch would be killed if I didn't take Nancy to Red Gash Valley. Gosh, Mrs. Harlan, you didn't——"

Jim, face grim and still amazed, caught Buck Layton's arm.

"Come on, cowboy."

They walked swiftly round the house. Harlan shook his head. Old Joe swore into his whiskers, and his eyes held a dangerous glint. Mrs. Harlan slipped an arm about her daughter's shoulders.

"Don't you worry, honey. We won't let you go."

Nancy made no answer. She was seeing Lanky and Fletcher back there in the outlaw rendezvous, to be killed if she was not taken there as redemption of their lives.

"I don't care a damn about the twenty thousand," Harlan said. "But if they get her back there—They're a mighty mean lot. They'll harm her! She can't go!"

"Of course she can't!" Windy growled. "We never expected her to go, Tom. I know the way old Lank and Fletch looked at me when I was leavin' that they didn't want me to fetch her. They'll be plenty willin' to die! It won't do for me to take Nancy back there. Them durned rustlers—Say, folks, you don't know how mean lookin' they are! I do! I seen 'em!"

"But that's it!" Nancy said tensely. "They are mean! We all know it, Windy. And we know they will do what they said, and kill Lanky and Fletcher if I don't go. We just can't let them be murdered! They are good boys!"

"Durned fools!" Windy corrected savagely. "It'll

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serve 'em right if they do get rubbed out! The only trouble is I orter hang along with 'em! It was all because of our durned foolishness in the first place, Nancy. You ain't thinkin' of lettin' me take you, are you?"

Before Nancy could reply the loquacious cowboy resumed:

"'Course I won't take you! But, folks, ain't there some way of savin' Lanky's life? He's the best friend I ever had, and Fletch—he ain't so bad himself!"

Mrs. Harlan, in a swift flow of words, kept assuring the girl that she was not even to think of going. The rancher stood as if dazed. Old Joe Holliday muttered:

"This hyar's sure the gol-durndest thing I ever heard of! Never seen nor heerd nothin' like it, nothin' like it a-tall!"

Jim and Buck returned now, walking fast and with their faces grim and unreadable. Nancy turned to them. Her eyes were for the tall man who had told her he loved her. That had been only a few brief minutes ago, yet then she had not the most remote notion she would be called upon to meet such a crisis as this.

"Jim——" she began, "Jim, what would you do if you were in my place?"

"He'd stay right here, of course!" cried Nancy's mother. "He's sensible. He knows it's the only sensible thing to do. Imagine those outlaws back there in Red Gash, asking for you to be brought to them so your father will have to pay a fortune to get you back! Of all things!"

"But she's worth ten times that much!" Harlan muttered.

His wife's eyes glowed now.

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"Of course she is, Tom Harlan! And that's the very reason we're not going to send her up there to risk her life in the hands of these outlaws!"

Nancy, ignoring all the excited, anguished talk, caught Jim's arm. Her eyes begged him to tell her what to do, then she said in a steady tone:

"Jim, what would you advise me to do?"

He regarded her steadily, saw as much courage as fear and doubt in her brown eyes. He shook his head.

"I don't believe I can tell you, Nancy."

"But why can't you?" she demanded, her fingers clutching his muscular forearm fiercely. "Lanky and Frank are back there. If what Windy says is true they'll be killed if I don't go."

"Oh, sure!" Windy broke in. "Them outlaws won't wait a minute to kill Lanky and Fletch if I don't bring you. That's what they told me. But that don't mean I'm goin' to take you, not by a durned sight! Let them kill Lank and Fletch. I'll ride back and tell 'em I couldn't get you, and they can kill me, too."

The cowboy dropped to a chair and took his head in his hands. His facial muscles twisted, and he groaned:

"Gosh a'mighty, they'll kill 'em sure, and Lank and me was just like we was brothers! I just gotta ride back and die with him!"

It was an appalling situation. Nancy Harlan's brain felt the reaction that was probably the first experienced by a human being—the desire for self-preservation. Her parents' first thoughts were for the protection of their child. In Windy's protestations there was no shallow garrulity now, but a deadly, tragic sincerity. He was ready to return to the outlaw valley and give up his life. Tears, however, welled from his eyes as he thought of Lanky Higgins.

Jim Barton knew what he would do. He and Buck

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Layton had decided, but neither felt that he could voice this decision. After a long, searching look into Jim's eyes, Nancy turned to her mother and father. She was very pale and tense, but her eyes shone with decision and her voice rang with it.

"I'll go!" she cried. "I want to go! It's the only way of saving those poor boys' lives. The outlaws won't kill me if——"

She paused to smile encouragingly at her anguished father.

"Daddy, will you pay them twenty thousand dollars to get me back?"

Harlan's features writhed and he held out his hands.

"I'd pay twenty million if I had it, Nancy! But you can't go! This is foolish, foolish! You can't think of it!"

Mrs. Harlan could not speak now, though her heart was being torn and wrenched. She, too, was picturing Lanky and Fletcher, dead from outlaw bullets. All her life she would think she might have saved them. Yet her daughter——

"Oh, will God tell us what to do?" she prayed as she looked beseechingly at Nancy.

"He has told me, Mother," the girl said. "I am going. We can't let those two cowboys die when it is within our power to save them."

The mother's arms dropped limply to her sides. She said in a tone that was little above a whisper:

"I suppose we can't! But what will happen to you, Nancy?"

The girl managed a brave laugh.

"I'll have to take my chances on that. One thing I'm sure of, Mother. They won't kill me."

Windy again sprang to his feet, and again his features writhed with emotion.

"But they will kill you, girl!" he cried. "They'll

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do worse than that to you if your paw don't dig up all that money! You don't know them hellions! Say, I seen 'em!"

Harlan said he would be willing to pay the ransom. He would start for Maguey immediately to get the money. Again Nancy managed to laugh, but not very gaily.

"Daddy, I'm not worth twenty thousand dollars. Isn't this terrible?"

Then Jim Barton was speaking, and the quiet courage of his voice made the others forget their fear and anguish. He had dropped an arm about Nancy's shoulders and she had nestled close under that arm.

"Folks, I reckon it'll surprise you a heap when I tell you that Nancy and I love each other," he drawled, "and that she has promised to be my wife."

Nancy was looking at the ground now, and there was colour in her cheeks.

"That's right," she murmured.

"Wal, I'll be gol-durned!" Joe Holliday muttered. "He comes out hyar to hunt outlaws and he takes to courtin'. And he sure didn't waste no time, either!"

"Nancy!" Mrs. Harlan breathed.

"Say," put in her father, "is this so?"

Windy was now staring as if he were petrified and very stupid.

"Say," he blurted, "do you mean you won her, Barton, in just a few days, when all the rest of us has loved her for years? It ain't fair! And there was George McCracken, too!"

"Never mind George McCracken!" Nancy flared. "I never loved him and all of you know it! Do I have to know the right man for months and years before I know I love him?" She turned her tense,

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eager face towards the man whose arms held her. "Do I, Jim?"

The smile he gave her as he looked into her dark eyes was not that of a man whose guns were swift and deadly, and who had made the killing and capturing of outlaws his work.

"I reckon if you feel I do you sure don't have to take long," he drawled. He drew her a little closer, and she lifted her face to kiss him, to the amazement of all the others.

"Wal, by drat, if she ain't a fack!" muttered old Joe. "This hyar sure is fast work!"

Windy wagged his head and mumbled something, forgetting for the moment that his best friend was back in Red Gash Valley and was to die, that he himself must ride back to Red Gash and forfeit his own life.

Then Jim Barton was speaking to them all again, and what she heard made Nancy draw away and stare at him in amazement, though admiration and love soon began to warm her eyes anew. She gripped his arm.

"Jim! Jim! Do you mean you are going, too?"

"Bet your life!" broke in Buck, who until now had had little to say.

"You, too?" cried the girl.

Buck bobbed his head.

"Yep."

Alternately grinning and serious, Matthew Aurelius Irwin was himself again, demanding to be told what was to be done, how it was to be done, when and where it was to be done, and who was going to do it.

"For goodness' sake, Windy, keep still!" ordered Nancy at last. "You act like a scared rooster."

"Aw, I ain't," grinned the cowboy.

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"But are you two goin' to Red Gash Valley?" Harlan wanted to know.

Jim and Buck nodded soberly. Mrs. Harlan caught Jim's arm and looked searchingly into his blue eyes.

"Jim——" she began as if it were difficult for her to say the name, "will you protect her and take care of her when she gets up there where those—those awful outlaws are?"

Jim patted her cheek.

"Mother Harlan, I'll do my best, I reckon you can rely on Buck for as much."

She drew back and looked at Jim as if she were fully seeing him for the first time. At length she turned to her daughter.

"You had better go with Windy, Nancy."

Jim and Buck began to explain what they planned to do. Nancy looked towards the blue fastness of the San Martins and wondered how it would feel to be there to-morrow in the hands of the outlaws. Windy's jaw dropped as he grasped the fact that he was to take the girl to Red Gash Valley and with her brave its terrors.

"Well, Buck," Jim said, "don't you think we had better be on our way?"

"Reckon so," replied the new sheriff of San Martin. "We won't be able to make very fast time in the night."

Little time was lost once decision had been reached, but before Jim swung into the saddle he took Nancy Harlan in his arms and held her close. She lifted a tearful, trusting face to him, and her lips trembled.

"Will you be there when I get to Red Gash, Jim?"

He pressed his lips to hers, and held them there a long time.

"I'll be there, sweetheart."

Buck Layton and Jim did not take the route over

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which Windy had recently come. Buck advised that they swing northeastward and encounter Red Gash Creek. Through the night they would follow its rugged course into the outlaw stronghold. They were nearing the foothills when Buck drawled as he looked over the ears of his horse:

"She's quite a girl, ain't she, Jim?"

Jim did not answer immediately, for now as ever since he had ridden away from the Bar H he was seeing Nancy Harlan.

"Yes, old-timer, she'll do to ride the river with."

"And you," remarked the sheriff of San Martin, "are sure one lucky hombre."

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CHAPTER XXX

THOUGH the slanting rays of the sun flooded the main portion of the southerly side of the range, black cloud-masses were gilded with yellow and painted with pink and red.

Nancy and Windy had left the Bar H before daylight. Except for one brief rest they had pushed steadily northward, the mountains slowly becoming nearer and then nearer.

There had been little talk, especially little for Windy during the ride. He was tormented by the thought that he was taking Nancy Harlan to her death, possibly worse. Too, he could not shake off the haunting fear that Lanky and Fletcher had already been killed.

To Nancy this adventure was too stupendous to be talked about. It was something that must await inevitable denouement. The sun was low when they reached the rocky trail that slanted down to the floor of the valley below the huge pile of boulders where Chico, the Mexican, had guarded ingress to the stronghold for so many days. The trail of the five horses—those of Fletcher and Lanky and their captors—had been easy enough to follow.

They reined in for a few minutes, speculating, doubting, fearing. They could see the easterly wall of the valley, but a jutting crag shut off view of the westerly rim and more than half the floor.

"She's sure one wild place," said Windy. "This here must be the right trail."

"It's the only trail there is," Nancy answered, wondering at the unnatural sound of her own voice

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in this terrifying loneliness. "Do you suppose they have——"

"Yeah, I was thinkin' that, too," Windy said, and forced a laugh.

It was the girl who resolutely led the way down the steep trail, leaning well back in the saddle to keep her tired horse in balance. She was resigned now, though fearful. All during the long, hard day she had hoped there would be no end to this journey, at least not the end she feared must come. As they reached comparatively level going, Windy spurred his mount alongside hers.

"Gosh!" he muttered. "I sure hope they ain't rubbed out Fletch and old Lank."

Nancy did not reply, for she was hoping even more than that. Windy reminded her they could still turn back. She looked at him with sombre eyes, but her lip curled a little.

"And let them kill those poor cowboys, if they haven't done it already?"

"That'd sure be tough on Fletch and Lanky," Windy said with an attempt at a grin.

As they rounded the slide of boulders the majesty and grandeur of what she beheld made Nancy pull her horse to a stop. For three miles ahead of them reached the sward of green meadow. In the distance the gorgeously painted cloud-masses hid the peak at which she had often looked from the ranch. The vertical westerly wall was in shadow, but the slanting sun made ambient and unreal lights on the rim opposite.

"Windy, it's wonderful!" she gasped.

"Sure one fine place for an outlaw hangout," Windy returned, unimpressed by the scene. "Want to ride on, Nancy? There's what looks like a cabin up there."

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Nancy touched her horse with a rowel. The cowboy fell in alongside.

Kirkup, like the others eager for the girl to come but no means certain she would, was in front of the cabin and was the first to see the two riders at the lower portal of the valley. He lifted the field-glasses, took a long look, and smiled incredulously.

"Hey, Jack!" he called. "Come on out! The gal's sure a-comin'!"

The lithe Ritter was outside in a few seconds. Nashwilder lumbered behind him. Presently Littrell sauntered out, a man of rare grace and pantherish movement. He glanced down the valley, then reached for the glasses. He was slow, deliberate, unmindful of the others in his survey through the powerful lenses.

"It's the girl right enough," he remarked casually, yet with a ring of pleased expectancy in his voice. "She's the one on the sorrel. Dressed in men's clothes, but there ain't no doubt about her bein' a girl."

"And even from here her face is good to look at," declared Kirkup. "Here, gimme them glasses, Jack. I want to take another peek at her."

Littrell did not give up the binoculars. Instead he said:

"There's no use lookin'. She'll be here pronto. That the damned fool you fellers sent to bring her?"

"Sure, that's him," Kirkup chuckled.

The outlaw leader was silent for perhaps a minute.

"Damned if I expected him to do it, boys. He's a bigger fool than I thought he'd be."

As they neared the cabin Nancy tried to still the frantic beating of her heart, to keep down the lump that rose and rose again in her throat. Windy was

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making as determined an effort at composure as he looked for his two friends. He groaned as he failed to see them. Nancy was looking for more than the two cowboys whose lives she had come to save. Had Jim and Buck been surprised and killed? Or hadn't they yet reached Red Gash Valley?

"This here sure don't look so good," Windy whispered hoarsely. He felt helpless, for he did not have a six-shooter. The outlaws had specified that he must come unarmed when he brought the girl.

"It doesn't matter how it looks, Windy," said the girl. "We can't run now. It's too late for that."

"Yeah. Gosh!"

Nancy's eyes were held, as if against her will, by the outlaws as she came near the cabin before which they stood. There were two who were beard-stubbled and hard-bitten, one burly, dirty and bearlike. The fourth was tall, graceful, one of the handsomest men she had ever seen. She believed he was Jack Littrell, the chief of the gang. There was something about the very way he waited that made him stand out above the others. She shivered, for she had heard tales about his ruthlessness and brutality.

Like Windy, she believed there were more than these four outlaws here. Where were the others? Had they remained in the cabin to act as reinforcements in case of trouble? Or were they away somewhere on their nefarious business?

"Howdy, miss," said Jack Littrell as he stepped to Nancy's horse.

She did not answer, for there was something besides steel in his steady, keen eyes. It was as if they were looking at her in the nude.

Ritter and Kirkup were grinning broadly. Nashwilder suddenly gave voice to his thick, maudlin laugh. Littrell turned to give him a quick scowl, and

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the yellow-bearded outlaw lapsed into silence. The leader's gaze returned to the girl.

"Well, well! Howdy, Windy," Ritter taunted.

"Howdy, Windy, old feller," chuckled Kirkup. "You sure are a man of your word!"

Nancy and Windy had had their orders before Jim Barton and Buck Layton had left the Bar H. It was the girl who now made the first movement to obey them. She courageously dismounted, and as she turned she talked to Windy mutely with her eyes. The cowboy swung to the ground, grabbed the bridle reins of both horses and led them quickly aside.

It took all Nancy's will-power to make her turn back. As she did she saw the pleasure, the lust, in the steely eyes of the lithe, handsome leader. Then she saw more, something that made her pale and almost cry out. She did utter a startled little sound as she flung herself to the left and dropped to the ground. Windy had seen the same thing and was in the air, determined to get his body as low as possible when the stillness of the early twilight was blasted wide open by the roar of guns.

Littrell, with his usual tigerish quickness, had gone for his weapons, but for once he was too slow. He was mowed down by the first blast from Jim Barton's six-shooters.

Jim had stood at the left corner of the cabin, and smoke and fire and lead spurted from the forty-fours he held at his hips. Kirkup, trying to draw, died. He loosed his grip on a Colt and slumped to the earth. Ritter managed to get a gun out of its holster, but spun around and flopped to his face before he could swing it up and slip his thumb off the hammer.

Uttering a terrified, maudlin groan, the slower Nashwilder tugged at a gun as he lumbered towards the other corner of the cabin. Part of his purpose was to

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escape the deadly hail of lead from the man at the left, part to hurry around the cabin and shoot the death-dealing apparition in the back.

Then Buck Layton's six-shooters went into action. He shot twice and the bullets ripped through Nashwilder's thick chest, one cutting a crease out of the end of his brutal heart. He crumpled and died as he hit the ground, with a guttural groan on his lips and an incredulous stare in his bloodshot blue eyes.

The battle was over within ten terrifying seconds. Then Nancy was sitting on the ground and Jim Barton was coming from the corner of the cabin with a smoking Colt in each hand and a grim smile on his lean, bronzed face.

"Oh—Jim!" she faltered. "Is that—all?"

He flipped his hot guns into their holsters and in two strides stood over her. She caught his hands as he reached them down. He lifted her to her feet, held her very close. He heard and felt her sobs as her face was hidden against his breast.

"I reckon it's all right, honey," he said with such coolness that she lifted her face.

"Aren't there—any more, Jim?"

Patting her shoulder gently, he replied that he believed there were no more outlaws who would give trouble.

Only now was Nancy conscious that there had been frantic yells from inside the cabin. She saw that Buck and Windy had disappeared. Clutching Jim's arms fiercely, she drew back a little and tried to see into the shack.

"Why!" she cried. "It sounds like Frank and Lanky! Oh, is it, Jim? Are they all right?"

He lifted her face and kissed her quivering lips.

"Well," he smiled, "it sure sounds like somebody was mighty happy."

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Windy staggered from the doorway, laughing and crying. He stumbled over Jack Littrell's dead body, sprawled and rooted his face into the dust. He scrambled to a sitting position, lifted his head and howled like a lonesome wolf with a full moon overhead.

"Yippity—yip!" he shrilled then. "Woweee! I'm a she-wolf from Bitter Crick, and this is my night to howl!"

He scrambled to his feet, braced his legs, and peered owl-eyed at Jim and Nancy.

"Say! Say! Looky here! Lanky ain't dead! He ain't dead a-tall, I tell you! He's in there alive as hell! Just seen him. Seen him kick. Heard him cuss me for a damned fool! Say, Nancy, can a dead man cuss me to my face? He can't, can he?"

Despite the dead men about her, Nancy had to smile. A grin crossed Jim's face.

"What about Frank Fletcher, Windy?" the girl managed.

"Aw, hell!" Windy yelled. "You can't kill him! He's in there, too, and he's plumb alive and kickin' and cussin'. Say, Nancy, he cussed me, and Lanky did, too, 'cause I was fool enough to fetch you up here."

The unexcitable Buck had been left to loose the ropes that had held the Bar H cowboys prisoners. Now Lanky and Frank staggered out, grinning and swearing happily and incredulously. As he again caught sight of his saddle partner Windy forgot everybody else. He flung his arms about Lanky's neck.

"Why, you old son of a gun!" Windy wept and laughed. "Why the hell didn't they kill you? I'll tell you why! You lousy, no-account maverick, they didn't kill you 'cause you wasn't worth killin'! Gosh a'mighty, but I'm sure glad to see you alive, Lank!"

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"Aw, Windy, why don't you kiss him and be done with it?" the new sheriff of San Martin County drawled. "Howdy, Fletch. Did they hurt you any?"

"Who, me?" grinned Fletcher. "Sure not. They made me a little uncomfortable at times though, with me and Lanky all tied up and them a-tellin' us as how they was goin' to cut our throats if that durned fool there didn't show up with Nancy. Howdy, Nancy."

The girl went to the grinning and grateful cowboy and kissed him. Then she tore Lanky away from the almost hysterical Windy and planted a kiss upon his cheek.

"Boys, boys!" she cried. "I'm so glad to see you alive!"

"Huh! Maybe you got the idea we ain't so glad to be alive," drawled Lanky. "Say, Nancy, slap that there fool in the face and make him quit his weepin'."

"W-w-why, you mean me?" Windy blubbered, grinning. "I ain't weepin', I'm laughin'!"

Jim Barton was thinking of serious and less happy things, for he knew that more than four outlaws had cornered him in the brushy cleft of the black wall. Yet here were only four accounted for.

In his effort to solve the puzzle swiftly, he discovered that Ritter was still alive. He lifted the lithe bandit and propped him against the wall. Death was already sitting in the saddle on a crumpling horse, but the mortally hurt outlaw kept his head up and a smile came to his face.

"Feller," he muttered slowly while his dying eyes glowed with admiration, "if you are that Barton hombre, you're a sure-enough man, and one hell of a fast and dead shot."

Jim said nothing, and Ritter strove valiantly to lift his right arm.

"Hombre," he went on with great difficulty as he

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extended a shaking hand, "before I cross the divide I'd just like—to shake—with an honest man that's a —dead shot and—got plenty—sand!"

Jim bent and took the hand. He gripped it hard.

"Thanks, old-timer," he said. "But where are the rest? There ought to be at least three more."

The dying outlaw clung to Jim's hand and moved his head to the right. Bloody froth was on his lips as he slowly muttered:

"Out there—by corral. Where new—new dirt is. Trouble. Littrell—All gone. No—no danger for you."

His glazing eyes roved to the horrified face of Nancy Harlan, who was close beside him.

"No danger—for you, miss—now. All gone and a —good job. Adios."

Ritter summoned all his desperate courage and smiled as he released Jim's hand.

"Hasta luega," he said without faltering now. "Vaya con Dios, both of you. I savvy. Adios."

Nancy turned her eyes as the outlaw died. Jim straightened him on the hard earth, and muttered so softly that only the girl heard:

"I'm glad the poor devil had a little good in him. It may help on the other side."

Gruesome work had been done, mostly by the happy cowboys. Jim and Buck had talked, and by themselves. From the first they had held a faint suspicion that George McCracken, after robbing his father, had headed for Red Gash, but neither wished to unearth the bodies beyond the corral, so Nancy was left without the torment of believing she had sent George to his death.

Now it was night. Buck and the cowboys sat before the crackling fire in the cabin, and Buck said little. Nancy and Jim were not there, for they had walked

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slowly up the black valley where they heard the gentle whisper of the breeze among the leaves of the cottonwoods and mountain sycamores that bordered the creek. His arm was about her, and she clung fiercely to one of his hands with both of hers.

"And you and Buck reached the valley before daylight, Jim? And lay in the brush all day back of the cabin, waiting for us to come?"

He told her briefly what he and Buck Layton had done. She lifted her face, and to him it was very beautiful in the starlight.

"You are brave, Jim Barton," she whispered, "and I love you. I shall always love you. I knew you would be here, Jim."

He turned her about, placed a hand to each of her cheeks and lifted her face so that he might look down into her eyes where the stars were reflected.

"Why did you know I would be here, Nancy, honey?"

"Because, Jim, you had told me you would," she answered simply.

The clouds had gone from the peak, and over it and the tall cliffs that rimmed the sides of the valley the stars twinkled to tell of to-morrow and brightness and sunshine and love.

"It's mighty hard for me to realise I'm goin' to be lucky enough to have you for my wife, sweetheart," Jim was telling her when she uttered a little gasp of fright.

"What was that, Jim?"

Listening intently, they heard the drum of hooves and the faint hum of voices, not from one direction but from two. Nancy crept into the protection of his left arm and felt the shape of the six-shooter he carried at that side. He gently patted her cheek.

"Nothin' to be frightened about, Nancy," he

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drawled. "Likely the Bar H and the Circle N riders. They were to come in from both ends of Red Gash in case they were needed."

In a few minutes a quavering, shrill cry came out of the darkness, and was buffeted from one tall wall to the other.

"Hi! Hi! Jim Barton! Whar's that son of a gu· of a fightin' man from Texas? Whar's Jim Barton?"

"By golly!" Jim cried, excited now. "It's old Joe Holliday. Let's go and show ourselves to him, Nancy."

Again he slipped his arm about her waist, and together they half ran towards the dark cabin, on which many riders were converging.

THE END

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